

Deus Ex Machina

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Summary: Post TLA- The New Age may not be as wonderful as it seemed... Even after the lighting, Isaac's part in saving Weyard is far from over. The adepts must again fight together for war, for peace, and for the perfect world they so desired.

***Chapter 1*: Prolusio: Prelude to an End**

Alex has always been my favorite GS character, and since he plays a relatively large role at the end of TLA, this 'fic will center around him for the most part. Isaac will also be a pretty main character. Which isn't to say that Felix and the other adepts will be forgotten; they'll be in here a great deal also. So... Enjoy.

Warnings: Rated T for mild language, graphic violence (in later chapters) and dark themes. Contains some implied Isaac/Mia, Felix/Sheba, and possible Gareth/Jenna, all in later chapters. Contains spoilers for the entirety of Golden Sun and Golden Sun: The Lost Age.

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----- DEUS EX MACHINA (by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya) ((Written: 6/19/05 Published: 5/07/06)) -----

Part One

Chapter One: Aftermath (*Prelude*)

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"...And after an age of darkness, the Golden Sun will rise..."

She is restless. She has been sleeping for a very, very long time. She is tired of waiting; she is tired of watching. She wants to be doing something; she wants to end it by her own hands. She is patient, but she has her limits. She is not *this* patient.

And she is happy at last, because her apocalypse has begun. She is happy, because she alone will get to see the curtain close, and darkness fall. She has waited for a very long time, and now the stage is hers at last. She is ready.

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He is tired, but he won't give up... He isn't ready to die. Not yet.

His hands still scramble for handholds that refuse to be found, and his feet search desperately for small fissures, tiny cliffs... Something, anything, to break his fall.

He has been falling for a very long time. Surely he must be miles beneath Weyard by now, surrounded by nothing but choking stone and heat and darkness and dry sand. He is afraid to open his eyes, despite the darkness, for fear that seeing his own plight will make him realize its reality. He doesn't want to know, he doesn't want to see, he doesn't want to feel the stone move past his fingers like he is nothing but a small breeze making its way towards the center of the world...

He breathes out of habit, in and out, in and out, even though there's probably no oxygen down here anyway. He stays alive out of habit, still searching for some kind of handhold, still searching for a way out...

Because he can't give up. He won't give up. He has the power of the Golden Sun, and he is invincible. He will live, he will move on to become something great. He can't die, not yet, when his life is just beginning. He *won't* die. He won't *ever* let go.

And he is *not* afraid. Uneasy, perhaps; desperate, yes; but not afraid. Because he knows he will survive.

And he isn't even surprised when he lands, with a force great enough to splinter his bones, upon a smooth stone surface. He isn't even surprised when an ethereal light sinks through his eyelids to poison his irises with a silvery glow. And without hesitation, he opens his eyes.

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Slowly, carefully, as if afraid of what he would see, Alex cracked his eyes open just enough to ascertain that the light he saw was, indeed, silver. Wait... A silver light miles under the Earth? That couldn't be right... He must have been dead, encased in stone far below Mt. Aleph, forever preserved by the lack of air and water...

Then the pain struck, biting horribly into his flesh like a living thing, reminding him that he probably wasn't dead; just hallucinating, or dreaming, or going insane. He definitely couldn't rule out the last option, at least. He hastily cast Pure Ply, which must have done something, as he could feel his bones knitting back together; the pain, however, continued. Uncertainly, he attempted to sit up; his limbs protested loudly at first, then relented to his requests and twitched to life, pulling him up so he sat with his back to a stone wall, his battered legs stretched out before him. He winced as he saw the unsightly bloodstains that marred the fabric of his tunic, though they were made almost unrecognizable by the thick coating of dust that covered every inch of his person.

Alex allowed himself a brief, wry smile at his predicament; he had wanted to be the strongest in all of Weyard, and look at him now. He was very disheveled, so dirty that he would need several hundred baths if-- when-- he got out of here, bruised, bleeding, and altogether unfit for "strongest in Weyard" status.

Sighing softly, he forced a thoroughly marred hand into moving and cast Douse above his head, hoping that the water might help his wounds, if not begin to wash away all the dirt and blood. The streams of cold water ran across his face in rivulets of pure bliss, and he opened his mouth for just a taste of the long-forgotten liquid; it tasted exactly the same as he remembered it, if even better after his long fall.

Feeling slightly more human, if not yet presentable, he opened his eyes again and blinked around the chamber in which he had landed. It looked much the same as did the rest of the scenery below Weyard: rocky, brown, dry, and very boring. He could not find the source of the silvery light; hard as he looked, it seemed to be coming from the very rocks themselves. And that just wasn't possible.

The most extraordinary thing about the chamber, though, was what sat in the middle: a strange charcoal-grey orb, so large that he could not have put his arms around it and been able to join his left and right index fingers. It was about half the size of the Golden Sun, he thought with a flicker of regret; though other than that, the gray orb and the Sun had nothing else in common. It had been so very bright and beautiful, filling his entire vision with a pulsing light that had been both wonderful and blinding... He could reach out and touch it, even now, as it had burned brightly enough to remain in his memory forever...

He laughed out loud; a rasping, unhealthy-sounding laugh that quickly transformed into a cough. So he coughed into the palm of his left hand, trying to remember that he was laughing; yes, laughing... Laughing at how pointless it had been to try, how foolish he had been to even think that he could be invincible. Laughing, yes... Because he couldn't quite remember how he had gone so far only to be right back where he started. No... He was back even further than

that. He was stuck in the centre of the Earth, damn it, and he couldn't do a thing...

He tried to silence himself, only to find that he could not; the coughs tore through his lungs and throat with a strange ferocity, and fresh blood trickled across his lips. He was insane, definitely insane; pure desperation could do that to a person, he knew. And he was just laughing at it all, because there was nothing else to do... He was just laughing, despite the tears on his cheeks. Funny, how far he could come, how many trials he could pass, only to end up buried beneath the very mountain he had tried to climb to reach his goal.

Life had a strange, cruel way of waving everything you could ever want in your face, then snatching it away at the last moment and laughing at you. To say that Alex felt slighted would be a massive understatement. It went deeper than that; he felt betrayed, horrified, vitiated. And even more... He was disappointed. Not the kind of disappointed where you say "oh well, better luck next time", brush yourself off, and get to your feet. It was the kind of disappointed where you sit in the same place for hours, just staring at the wall, because you no longer know what to do with yourself now that everything you ever hoped to dream of is gone. It was this kind of disappointment that he could not stand, and after a certain amount of time, he grew angry.

How could that filthy *rock* just take everything away? What gave him the right? Alex had worked hard to gain power, and it should belong to *him* now-- certainly not Isaac, who had done little, if anything, to deserve it. Isaac would not even know what to do with such power-- he was a pacifist, after all, and not used to such radical ideas as reshaping (or ruling) the new world. Just a taste of immortality would be

too much for a boy like that; surely he would never be able to properly utilize his talents, or his longevity, as Alex could.

And more than anything, more than everything, it just *wasn't fair*. He had been told from a young age that if you work very hard, you would be rewarded. Well, he had worked; God knew, he had travelled the world, fought his share of monsters, gone without food or sleep or shelter-- all so he could gain what his heart truly desired. He did not want love, or companionship, or endless riches, like all those inferior, magic-less, ignorant villagers. He wanted immortality, and even more, he wanted *power*. Pure, limitless, awe-inspiring, power. Nothing less. That power had been accessible, had been within his grasp-- for a few wonderful, blissful moments it had been all his, coursing within him, filling him, becoming him-- then gone. Well, not completely gone; he could tell that much of the power was still there, but the frustrating thing was that he didn't know what it was for or how to use it. He could *feel* the power within him-- not limitless, but nearly so-- and try as he might, he could not use it.

His normal spells, like Ply and Douse, seemed to work with no effort on his part, but he could not find any *new*, more interesting powers to use. Nothing, certainly, that would allow him to claw his way to the surface. The surface... He had been down here for some time already. What if he never saw the sun again? What if, instead of being the guiding force that led Weyard into a New Age, he became an almost forgotten, archaic name in a musty old textbook somewhere, years and years from now? He would not be remembered as a God, as a hero, as a revolutionary... He would be remembered as an evil man, a friendless, backstabbing man who sought to rule the world.

And he was not an evil man, but would the world care? Of course not. Would they care to note that, in his quest to achieve his dreams, he had killed no one intentionally? Saturos, Menardi, Karst, and Agatio had killed many who got in their way-- whether intentionally or unintentionally, he'd never know for sure-- but since the lighting they would be remembered as heroes, as martyrs who died so that Weyard could live. But Alex would be forgotten, only mentioned in passing as a psychopath with delusions of grandeur.

He was not an evil man. But it didn't matter-- not really.

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Isaac heaved a weary sigh as he put down his shovel; rebuilding Vale was turning out to be an even more daunting task than he and his fellow villagers had initially thought. They had enlisted the help of others from Vault, Lunpa, Bilibin, and even Kalay; but after Mt. Aleph had collapsed upon itself, it had left a great deal of rubble, which covered the former town of Vale and its surrounding for miles around. There was little that could be salvaged; the best they could hope for was that the psynergy stone and sanctum were somewhat intact beneath the layers of rock.

The first order of business was to clear away the layers of rubble, as the stubborn village elders had insisted that Vale could only be rebuilt upon the same land it had stood before. Plus, they hoped to unearth whatever they could, which probably wouldn't be much, but they could try.

Isaac and every able-bodied villager had been working nonstop for four full days, and still they could see that what they had done was only chipping at the edges. It would take many more days, maybe even months, just to clear away enough of the rock to rebuild a few houses. By then they'd

be too exhausted to build, but that didn't seem to daunt them. All of the villagers, even some of those not from Vale, were enthusiastic and determined. They wanted to prove, perhaps, that they *could* do the impossible: build a new town despite the ruins of a large mountain that blocked their path.

Isaac tried to remain just as motivated as his father, but after returning from a journey of many months, he couldn't help but feel very tired, as if the very marrow was being drained from his bones. He worked just as hard as the others, using as much psynergy as he could without exhausting himself; but by now, he just wanted a good few days of rest with his family and friends.

He smiled at this thought, and glanced over to his companions, who were taking a break several yards away; Jenna was talking animatedly about Felix's childhood, while Felix sweatdropped and mumbled under his breath. Ivan, Sheba, Mia, and Picard had all decided to stay for the rebuilding-- they had no doubt that they would be needed, and however much they missed their families and friends back at their own homes, they were reluctant to part from each other.

Isaac, too, would miss them... Miss their adventures and misadventures, however tiring and difficult they had been at the time. He even missed fighting monsters with them; how he could trust any one of them to watch his back in those fights, and how he wouldn't hesitate to watch theirs... He missed sunsets on their flying ship, the mists of Lemuria, the warm beaches of the Apojii Islands, even the ice-covered glaciers of Tundaria... And all the lighthouses, solemn and strong in their perfection, rising into an azure sky as if they stood watch over all of Weyard...

Things *had* been different since the lighting, but not quite as much as he had expected. Imil and the other northern areas were warmer, the weather was less severe, there were far less renegade monsters, and people were generally more upbeat than they had been before. Perhaps it was too early, but Isaac had not noticed other people gaining strange psynergetic powers, nor did he notice any great difference in his own. Well, he could use much more psynergy without exhausting himself, and his small cuts and bruises from digging through rubble seemed to heal uncannily fast. He wondered if he should ask his friends about this, to see whether they had noticed the same things, but he didn't think they had. At the end of every day, each one of them seemed a geat deal more tired, drained, and battered than he did.

Life on Weyard, however, remained much the same. The continents had probably stopped shrinking, but it was far too early to tell; and it was also far too early for great civilizations like Lemuria to arise. He didn't know all that much about the Golden Sun or the relighting of the lighthouses, though; nor did anyone else on Weyard, as far as he knew. Perhaps nothing began to change until several weeks or months after the relighting...

"Hey! Isaac!" Jenna's holler broke through his thoughts, and he lifted his head to blink at the orange-and-pink sun, which was now setting, casting a bronze pallor across the rocks spread out across the horizon. "We're going back to Vault now! Are you coming or not?"

Those taking part in Vale's excavation were all staying in Vault during the night; it was a good temporary solution to the problem of housing, though Vault's citizens found that they didn't quite know what to do with so many extra people. Accommodations had been made; the inn was

stuffed full, and those villagers who were willing to do so had taken in those who wouldn't fit. Food wasn't a problem, as both Bilibin and Kalay had agreed to send free shipments of food for as long as they were needed.

Isaac picked up his shovel and turned towards Jenna, covering the space between them in a few long strides. "Sorry... I was just thinking."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "You think too much, Isaac. C'mon, let's go."

He glanced back at the setting sun, suddenly unnerved by its crimson glow, then turned around. He had already done his share in saving the world... And somehow it still felt as if his journey had only just begun.

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Alex didn't realize until he regained consciousness that he had lost it in the first place. His first reflex was to reach out and grab something- anything- because he was falling, falling, falling into the centre of the Earth--

--and then he realized that the thing he was clutching was a quite solid-- and smooth-- wall, and he was lying on firm ground. Panic surged within him as he remembered where he was, but he fought it down with a few deep breaths. There had to be some kind of *purpose* to this chamber, as it obviously hadn't been formed naturally, and he was damn well going to find out what that purpose was-- and hopefully escape in the process. If such a thing was even possible.

Slowly, he sat up, disgusted with himself for his own rising panic and desperation. It wasn't like him to even *consider* giving up, when there was the slightest hope- however indecimal- that he could make it. Weakness was not a

character trait that he appreciated in anyone, least of all himself. He wasn't going to sit here and *think* about his predicament, damn it all-- he was going to get up and *do* something. He had nearly limitless power now, after all, and what good was it if it couldn't get him out of this mess? He had survived the fall, and now he was going to find his way to the surface so he could make something of his life in the New Age.

Once on his feet, he used the wall to steady himself, pleased to find that all his wounds-- even the most severe of them-- had somehow healed themselves during his period of unconsciousness. He felt his psynergy coursing through him, and had an almost unquenchable desire to let it overflow, spilling out through his fingers, filling the entire chamber with water until the walls buckled, a spout of water carrying him all the way to Weyard's surface--

He fought this desire down, telling himself that even if he *had* gained psynergy that powerful, it wouldn't be wise to test it right away. It would be better to inspect the cavern first, to see what it had to offer. Later, he could reach out with his psynergy and sense exactly what lay above, so he could formulate a plan that would set him free. Gingerly, he moved himself towards the centre of the underground cavern, and the dead-looking orb. As he got closer, he found that the large orb was not perfectly round and smooth, but riddled with pits and craters, as if it had survived some kind of wide scale psynergetic explosion. He examined it closely from all angles without touching it, but there did not seem to be any kind of pattern to the marks and indentations. They appeared to be completely random- there were just as many on the right side as there were on the left side. That was strange... Had it really survived an explosion, there should have been more damage done to one side than to the other...

Shrugging, he placed both hands on the orb, bracing himself for some kind of eruption, or perhaps an ethereal voice, or...

Nothing happened.

Smiling slightly, so that one side of his mouth curled up more than the other, he removed his gloves, cast them aside, and tried again.

Still nothing.

He waited, holding his breath, which didn't seem to matter because it was as if he didn't even need to breathe anymore. He let a tiny taste of psynergy seep from his fingers and into the orb, and continued to wait.

Nothing.

And then, very slowly, the orb opened one large eye, blinking around until its pupil settled upon Alex. "Who are you and what do you want?" It asked in a voice that echoed both everywhere and nowhere, a voice that was neither male nor female.

Alex stumbled backwards as it spoke, his eyes widening as the rock's irritated words shook the entire chamber. He gulped nervously, then did his best to look as if he had completely gained his composure, which was a difficult feat, considering who it was that had stripped the Golden Sun's full power from him.

"Ah, Alex..." It said, and closed its one eye, which somehow seemed to be a threatening gesture, at least under the circumstances. "Imagine meeting you here..."

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A group of eight adepts rounded the hill that curled around the northern side of Vault, shielding it from the view of its neighbors, Vale and Lunpa. The hill was not steep, but smoothed gently down into a shallow valley, which held a small village at its heart. The teens dragged their feet as they walked, not from any reluctance to reach their destination, but from sheer exhaustion after a whole day's work of hard physical labor. After the fifth day of such work, most of them were nursing multiple blisters on their hands, bruises on their legs from trudging through rubble, and dark circles under their eyes. After all, they were magic users, not construction workers, and though they did use their psynergy when they could, it had its limits.

Or at least Isaac thought it did. He had not said anything about it to his friends, but for the past few days, he had been able to use his psynergy without ever depleting it. True, he did grow tired, just like the rest-- both mentally and physically. But somehow, he had yet to find the limit of just how far his power could stretch. Just today, he had Moved seven large boulders in succession without feeling even slightly taxed. He felt both empowered and slightly afraid. Where was this power *coming* from? And why did he have it when the others did not?

To make things worse (or perhaps better; he hadn't quite decided yet), his wounds-- multiple scrapes, liaisons, bruises, and blisters from his work-- seemed to heal much faster than normal. He hardly even needed to use a simple Cure at the end of each day anymore, whereas the others spent a good while every evening just healing themselves and nursing the nastiest of their blisters and bruises. So far, the others hadn't really noticed, but it was only a matter of time. Even Piers was starting to show some exhaustion, and he and Garet were probably the strongest of them all.

With these things and more on his mind, Isaac found that he barely even noticed where he was going. He just followed the seven others towards a horizon that was quickly changing color from blue to orange and red. The sun was slowly descending, hanging uncertainly above a distant hill, as if unsure of its ability to slide further west without falling forever off the edge of the earth. For a moment, Isaac sympathized with it; it knew what it had to do, but it was still afraid of making a wrong step somewhere, of screwing things up and being lost forever...

At last, the ground beneath his feet began to level off, and he looked up in mild surprise to find that he and his companions had already entered the town of Vault. He stifled a yawn and followed Felix into the inn, greeting his parents in a distracted sort of way and immediately ascending the stairs. He was not particularly tired, thanks to his newfound stamina, but nonetheless he wanted some time to think, and pretending to go to bed early would give him a good excuse to do so. Of course, some of the others would probably take his example. If he was tired, they must be at least doubly so, and he didn't blame them. It had been a very long five days.

When Isaac reached the room he shared with Felix, Gareth, Ivan, and Piers (the inn was understandably rather short on rooms and beds, so Isaac had volunteered to take the floor while letting the others decide amongst themselves who would get the one available bed), he washed the layers of rock dust from his face and hands, changed into more comfortable clothes, and bid good night to his roommates.

"You're not coming to dinner?" Gareth asked, somewhat surprised. Being an avid eater, he probably had trouble imagining how his companion could skip a meal after a day

of hard labor. "But it's steak and potato salad tonight, and I know how much you love--"

Isaac waved his friend's objections aside with a wan smile. "No thanks, Gareth, I'm just tired tonight. I'll have extra servings of breakfast tomorrow to make up for it."

Gareth accepted this excuse with a shrug, and left the room after a quick good night. Felix and Piers followed suit, though Piers glanced back at Isaac, giving him a searching frown that was part suspicion, part concern. It left Isaac feeling vaguely uneasy for a moment, but then it passed, and the door closed behind his friends. He extinguished a few of the lamps on the walls, watching the smoke curl into the semi-darkness that wrapped around him like a warm blanket. The weather had been much fairer since the lighting, and every day was like summer, so he did not even bother with a blanket, but lay straight on the wood floor.

Isaac pressed one ear against the floorboards, letting the steady hum of voices downstairs fill his head with static. Though he had reserved this time specifically to think, he found that he did not really even want to anymore. Thinking took far too much effort, and lately it had been almost painful. Besides, what would thinking really accomplish? It wasn't like it would change anything, and he was beyond hoping for a sudden, poignant insight that would help him deal with everything. *What will be, will be*, he thought sleepily, and rolled over onto his back. The lull of voices decreased in volume, and he stared up at the ceiling, its rafters concealed in darkness. A single lamp remained lit on the other side of the room, and it created shadows that danced across the floors and walls. Isaac's shadow was diminutive one moment, then gigantic the next, distorted into something that no longer looked even vaguely human.

The shadows hissed and laughed, and Isaac smiled into them. It was funny, really... It was really very funny...

And he slid off into sleep before he could remember what it was that he was supposed to find amusing. The sweet, soft sound of a woman's laughter slipped into the room from beneath the floorboards, and wrapped around him, squeezing him so tight that he could not breathe. And he was laughing, somewhere far away... He was only laughing, and it hurt, but he couldn't stop.

Outside the cozy little town of Vault, smoke rose from chimneys, dancing and soaring into the sky, which was now a velvety blue. Into the west, the sun had fallen off the edge of the earth, leaving Gaia falls tinged with red. The horizon flared crimson, and then there was darkness.

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***Chapter 2*: Somnium: Dreaming Awake**

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----- DEUS EX MACHINA (by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya) ((Written: 4/29/06 Published: 5/13/06)) -----

Chapter Two: Awakening (*Dreaming*)

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Someone or something out there, Alex reflected as he faced the Wise One once again, really, really hated him. As if he hadn't suffered enough yet after being buried beneath an entire mountain and having his dream stripped from him, now he had to deal with this rock-- again-- in a small unventilated room beneath the surface of Weyard. He just hoped that he could think of a way to get out of here, and soon. He'd never wanted a roommate.

Both slightly afraid and slightly defiant, Alex tried to rearrange his features into an expression that conveyed at least a small amount of confidence. That big rock may have taken away part of the power that was rightfully his, but he still held half of the golden sun's strength. And no rock, no matter how big or how ugly, could best him again. By God, he wouldn't *let* it. He'd been through enough injustice already, and he was going to keep the power that was rightfully his. No matter what.

"What do you want *now*?" He asked irritably, confidence rising as he felt psynergy welling up within him. It was beautiful-- unharnessed, pure power, that knew no limits and no rules. Of course he could beat the Wise One if it

came to that; he could beat *anything*. He could still rule the world. The realization that his dream was still somewhat within his grasp-- if not as perfect as he had wanted it to be-- gave him added courage, and he glared at the Wise One's single, unblinking eye.

The Wise One laughed. Actually, it was not so much of a laugh as a small earthquake; deep, rumbling sounds echoed throughout the small chamber, and a few bits of stone showered down upon Alex's head. He gritted his teeth and brushed them off, annoyance quickly building itself into anger. He didn't take well to being laughed at, by giant boulders least of all.

"What do I want?" The Wise One repeated, his ancient voice still containing traces of laughter. "What do *I* want?" He paused, as if he were considering the best answer to this question. "I suppose you know, Alex, that I am the oldest being in existence. Except perhaps God-- but I am close enough to God that it doesn't really matter." He laughed again, and this time the sound was almost cruel instead of humorous. "What I want... Is for Weyard to die." He stopped abruptly, waiting for this to sink in.

Alex blinked, absently brushing a few more bits of rock from his head and shoulders. He tried to think of something intelligent to say, or better yet, something intimidating; but "What?" was all that came out. The Wise One was supposed to *protect* Weyard... Unless it had gone insane in the short time since he had seen it last. Was insanity contagious? If so, he may have caught it from someone... Namely, himself. And after the events of the past few hours, Alex wasn't entirely ready to rule out insanity. It would actually explain an awful lot.

The terrible, hoarse laughter came again, and it was a moment before the giant rock continued. "The only question was, should I let it die slowly or have it go out in a blaze of war and strife?" It closed its one eye briefly, and made a movement that was somewhat reminiscent of a human shaking their head. "I am very, very old. I am not used to change... I am not used to violence and fear. So, naturally I wanted it to die off slowly. But, alas... The lighthouses were destined to be relit, and Weyard was destined to blaze again before it fell. And now..."

Alex blinked a bit more, not really sure if he was actually hearing this or not. He had fallen very far for a very long time... Insanity was an option, yes, but couldn't this easily be a simple hallucination, or a dream? After all, his understanding had always been that the Wise One's job was to protect Weyard and all its people from harm. It was, indeed, a Godlike role, and in the past, it had done good things to help the people of Weyard. It had stopped the lava from Mt. Aleph's eruption from reaching Vale, for example. It was widely revered throughout many countries, though some knew it by a different name than others. It just didn't make sense that the Wise One would turn out to be some sadistic being bent on the earth's destruction. That, Alex reflected bitterly, would be his description now.

But it just wasn't plausible-- why go through all that trouble, then? If Weyard was going to die eventually, then why interfere at all? If he'd never sent Isaac on his quest to stop Saturos and Menardi from lighting the lighthouses, then Weyard would have died anyway. If he were as old and tired as he claimed, then surely he would have been content to sit back and watch as Weyard destroyed itself, whether through inaction or warfare. Did it really matter which method were used if both had the same result? Besides, the Wise One had taken part of the golden sun's power from him and

transferred it to Isaac, when it new full well that Alex had interesting plans for that power. In addition, he had tried to *kill* Alex as well, presumably for good measure, when for all he knew, Alex could have been the angel of death for all of Weyard. No... The rock had to be either lying, or saying this for some malevolent purpose, in which case he wasn't going to be easily manipulated.

It was Alex's turn to laugh. "You? Kill Weyard off at last? Sorry, I don't buy it." He pushed his hair back with one hand, still laughing softly at the rock before him. "If that was really your goal, then why did you bother taking part of the golden sun's power from me? You knew I could have singlehandedly destroyed or enslaved every person on the planet. You probably could have even manipulated me into doing it, but you didn't. So why? It couldn't have just been a whim. You must have given the power to Isaac Sol in order to *protect* Weyard, not harm it. You knew, then, that Isaac could stop me should I live to use my own newfound power for evil."

The Wise One chuckled, causing a small avalanche towards the back of the chamber, and gazed intently at Alex for a moment. When it spoke again, its voice had a strange quality to it that was difficult to place, but which made Alex feel almost uneasy. "You... You do not understand at all. When Mt. Aleph was destroyed after you found the golden sun, I knew you would survive even if you *did* fall several miles beneath Weyard's surface. You may have figured this out already, but the power you have attained makes both you and Isaac essentially immortal. So, I knew you would survive... And I made plans to accommodate you."

Alex frowned. This did not sound right... It didn't sound right *at all*. He didn't like being anyone's pawn, and the Wise One's tone suggested that he had been one all along. It was an entirely unpleasant thought, because he was used to

being in control; he was used to manipulating others, not having others manipulate him. In a strange way, it made him feel violated, as if someone had taken something very special to him and used it against him-- damaging his pride in the process.

"You see, Alex... You still have a part to play. A rather large part, in fact... Your power is much too great to be wasted. You alone will see this through to the end; you alone will bring about Armageddon. You alone will know what becomes of everything after Ragnarok... You are my irreplaceable, lovely pawn."

As the Wise One finished his speech, a dull rumbling filled the room, and the floor and walls began to shake so violently that Alex was thrown to his knees, gasping for breath and swearing softly as he was pelted with small stones. Something hit him hard on the head, and he swore louder as blood trickled into the corners of his eyes and made trails through the rock dust on his cheeks. His forehead exploded in pain, and then there was nothing.

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Isaac sighed heavily and rolled over, searching for a slightly more comfortable spot of floor. His friends were all already asleep, snoring to their heart's content, well-fed and thoroughly exhausted. He, however, had not slept much at all for the past few days. He was tired after each day, yes, but a few short hours of quiet and rest seemed to be all he needed to be rejuvenated for the next day. Sleep did not really seem to refresh him anymore, at least not the way it had before... Well, before the lighting. He wondered whether he even *needed* to sleep. It was a disturbing thought.

So, all hope of sleep forsaken, he reflected with a wan smile that *now* he had plenty of free time to think. He had fallen asleep briefly while his roommates had been eating dinner, but he had awakened shortly after their return, having achieved little in terms of neither sleeping nor thinking. Of course, now he had plenty of time...

Alex. Now there was a subject he had managed to avoid mentally, even through five days of very boring labor and five sleepless nights (in most cases, equally boring). He wasn't sure, really, why he was subconsciously avoiding the topic; there was something about the man, perhaps, and his sudden disappearance, that made Isaac uneasy. He had said that his goal in ensuring that the lighthouses were relit was simply to see a New Age; to see a time when men again possessed the awesome power of alchemy, and great civilizations rose, and great men led other great men in creating something new and beautiful.

Isaac had not known Alex well at all, but he knew enough of the man to know that he was manipulative. It was a matter of opinion whether he had actually cared about those he manipulated, but the consensus was that he was... Well, not the kindest of people. Isaac didn't think he was truly cruel, *per se*, but he could not honestly say that he was anything close to a good Samaritan. But Alex's character notwithstanding, it was definitely possible that he had some ulterior motive in aiding Saturos, Menardi, Karst, and Agatio. He didn't want to jump to conclusions and suggest that it was a self-serving motive, but that was entirely possible.

However, no one had heard a word from Alex since he had last been seen at Jupiter Lighthouse-- no one, that was, but a little girl from Vale. She had happened to be talking to Isaac shortly after he and his father had been reunited with Dora, and had mentioned that she had seen a strange blue-haired

man near Vale shortly before the collapse of Mt. Aleph. She had told no one else, though-- or if she had, they had thought nothing of it, for rumor had it that Alex had just disappeared after the lighting. But if Alex truly had been near Vale before Mt. Aleph's collapse, then he was surely dead. That wasn't the real mystery, though-- what Isaac really wanted to know was *why* Alex had been near Mt. Aleph that day, and what he had been after all that time.

In addition, the collapse of Mt. Aleph and the fate of the Golden Sun still bothered Isaac (and Kraden, too). Was the Golden Sun simply absorbed back into the Earth? Did it explode, causing the mountain to crumble? Or did someone perhaps claim its power? And if so, then did they survive? It seemed likely that anyone crazy enough to take the power of the Golden Sun would not be able to escape danger in time, for the mountain had crumbled shortly after the lighting of Mars Lighthouse. Then again, it depended on the nature of the power they had been given; the golden sun was said to be able to do anything for a person-- eternal life, limitless power, limitless riches... If this was true, then surely someone with such an awesome amount of strength could survive. But it was unlikely that anyone would even *know* about the golden sun besides Kraden and the eight adepts, so the chances of someone having claimed its power were slim.

As for Alex--

Then it clicked. Not for the first time in his life, Isaac felt like bashing his head against a wall, wincing at how stupid he had been to avoid this subject. If Alex had known so much about the relighting and the New Age, and the golden sun had appeared on Mt. Aleph, and he had been seen near there just before the lighting... Of course. It made sense; surely the golden sun was Alex's reason for wanting to see

the lighthouses relit. He may not have been an evil man, but even good men had been known to go to great lengths for things such as eternal life, riches, and... Power. Isaac shook his head. He should not make judgements about a man he had barely known, regardless of the others' opinions of him.

Had Alex reached the golden sun in time? If so, what sort of power had it given him and what had he done with it? Was he still alive to appreciate it? If he had survived the mountain's collapse, then where was he? Miles away by now? Buried beneath the rubble? He didn't like the sound of the latter possibility. It gave him a creepy mental image of he and his friends sorting through the ruins of Vale, only to find a certain blue-haired man beneath some boulder, immortal and all-powerful. Even more creepy, that mental image somehow irresistibly reminded him of Pandora's box. Was he Pandora, then? Would he unknowingly unleash evil on the world?

He rolled over again, trying to block out Gareth's loud snoring. Sometimes, it was possible to think too much. Then again, he had a reputation for being the careful one; for thinking things through and making fair, intelligent decisions. He wasn't quite sure he agreed with that-- as a fighter, he had to go with his instincts rather often, and instincts were neither logical nor well thought-out. However, he could say for himself that he tried to avoid making rash decisions when possible. Perhaps that came from thinking far too much on sleepless nights like these.

The Wise One. That was another subject he had avoided thinking about, not because it was unpleasant in itself, but because it brought back some bad memories. Fighting his own father, and Felix and Jenna's parents, for example. That was something he still re-lived in his nightmares. He still did not completely understand the Wise One's purpose or

motivations, but he trusted that they were not really evil. After all, its duty was to protect Weyard and its citizens from harm-- surely it had done, all along, what it deemed necessary to keep Weyard alive and well. It may not have been trying for a storybook ending, but it had wanted to protect the planet, and Isaac could not fault it for that. Unfortunately, he'd had no chance to ask it why it had done everything it had, for like Alex, it had disappeared after the lighting. Perhaps it considered its job done for now, or it was otherwise engaged, or it did not consider the questions of a seventeen-year-old boy worth answering. Whatever the reason, Isaac had not seen it since the events on the Mars Lighthouse Aerie. Maybe he should be glad; after all, it could easily be a good sign that it hadn't made an appearance. The earth was no longer in danger, as far as he knew. He should be able to relax now, and start a new life.

If only it were that easy... He liked to spend a lot of time thinking, but this also meant that he spent a lot of time worrying. Jenna liked to joke that he'd be an old man by twenty. Maybe that was true. He didn't feel very young. He felt overwhelmed; even though their adventures were over, the others saw him and Felix as unofficial leaders. Even many of the older citizens of Vale and Vault looked up to them now, despite their age. They had proven themselves, he supposed; and there was something of a price to be paid for saving the world.

No, his journey was not over, really... It was just beginning. After Vale's rebuilding got more under way, he and the other adepts were planning to visit the lighthouses, to see and record what had changed since the lighting. Depending on what they found, they might still be needed by Weyard. If everyone started developing psynergetic powers, then they couldn't be allowed to run amok without training. No, someone-- or several someones-- would have to train them.

Isaac knew, instinctively, that he would have some role to play as the New Age emerged. He couldn't afford to relax. He had been nominated as leader from the beginning, and it seemed that the title wasn't going to simply disappear. It was his job to worry, to make sure everything turned out okay, to make sure that nothing else threatened Weyard. He wasn't too modest to admit that he *could* lead-- but, at times, he wished he didn't have to. It was a more difficult position than many people realized.

Not to mention that, at the moment, he had ample reason to worry. There was Alex, for one thing, and the rebuilding, and the as yet unknown effects of the relighting, and his strange new ailments. And suddenly, he was very tired... Sleep may not have given him much true *rest* for the past few days, but he knew now that he did still need it; perhaps not for the rest, but for the escape. No one, he reflected, could live in reality *all* the time... It was enough to drive you insane. He wondered about that, sometimes.

He fell asleep to the sound of his friends' heavy breathing; of soft, whispering voices downstairs; of the earliest birds just starting to chatter; of his heart beating and filling each moment with a strange, monotonous drumbeat. He dreamed that he had wings. He dreamed that he was flying, above everything, and it was all beautiful.

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The first thing Isaac noticed upon waking was that his head was throbbing horribly. He moaned softly and rolled over, experiencing an unpleasant jolt of pain as a loose floorboard dug into his side. Someone was speaking to him, but he couldn't make out the words through the cacophony of his own thoughts. The voice was familiar, soft and lilting, almost musical... He felt something cool on his forehead, and

instantly the pain vanished, replaced by sweet nothingness. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, smiling into the semi-darkness that prevails just before dawn. "Mia...?"

The Mercury adept removed her hand from his forehead, somehow managing to both frown and smile at the same time. "Are you okay, Isaac...? Usually you don't sleep that deeply. I think you might've had a fever."

Isaac shook his head and struggled to move into a sitting position, absently rubbing his temples with his left hand. "I think I'm okay now... I just didn't sleep very well." His brain finally took in the fact that it was still dark, and neither he nor any of the other adepts ever woke before sunrise. "Is something wrong? It's still pretty early."

"Sort of... A few minutes ago, a Goblin came into Vault. It killed one of the sentries before we could get to it. I think the others are handling it, but we might need your help."

Isaac moaned again, still rubbing his temples. "Monsters? Here?"

Mia shook her head, getting to her feet and retrieving her staff from where she had left it next to the door. "I didn't think it would happen either, not after the lighting. Are you coming, Isaac?"

He nodded, standing very slowly so he wouldn't have to use a bedpost for help. Because he was feeling fine now. Completely and totally fine, except for the fact that his head was about ready to explode. Maybe he was finally being punished for thinking too much when he could have been sleeping peacefully, with everyone else. Wearily, he lifted his sword from its hook on the wall and followed Mia out the door and down the stairs, trying to coordinate his steps so it did not look like he was in any pain.

When he and Mia reached the bottom of the stairs, he could instantly tell that something was wrong: all the inn's tenants were wide awake, staring fearfully in the direction of the door, which had been barricaded with several chairs, an oven, and a dining table. The innkeeper's wife was pacing back and forth just outside this jumble of furniture, wringing her hands. The innkeeper was nowhere to be found.

Isaac felt a flash of uncharacteristic irritation, possibly from lack of sleep, and lifted one hand, enjoying the feeling of psynergy coursing down his arm and into his fingers. With one flick of his wrist, the pile of wooden furniture went soaring to the other side of the room, narrowly missing Gareth's little sister, who shrieked and glared at him. The innkeeper's wife took her example and began to shake a finger at him, though she continued to pace as though her inn had never been disturbed.

Isaac shrugged an apology, slightly puzzled at his own behavior, and swept out the door, his sword gripped so tightly in his right hand that his knuckles showed white. Mia frowned slightly at the furniture, then at Isaac, and followed him out of the inn.

'You don't even know what you're capable of, do you...? You've never tested your new power.'

"What?" Isaac turned back to look at Mia, brow furrowed. "Did you say something?" Though it hadn't sounded at all like her voice... It was deep and cruel and horrible, and made his head hurt even more... And why would Mia say something like that...? None of it made sense, and his head *really* hurt, and he probably should have tried to get more sleep last night...

Mia said nothing, but shook her head, frowning slightly at him. "Come on, the Goblin is over here, by the town entrance." She brushed past him to take the lead, hurrying forward in the direction of the rising sun, which was beginning to claw its way up the eastern hills, bearing its blood-red fingertips, which spread their color into neighboring clouds. Isaac paused a moment to stare at this phenomenon, the spectral words he had heard a moment before echoing through his head. '*You don't even know...*' He shifted his sword so that part of its weight rested on his shoulder, and followed Mia into the red sun.

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Felix bit his lip as he concentrated on dodging the Goblin's forceful swings, not wanting to think about what would happen if he got in the way of that gigantic club and the ground. Being crushed to death had never really been on his list of things to do. "Garet, Ivan! Behind you!" Almost too late, the adepts jumped out of the way of the Goblin's other club, rolling to semi-safety a few yards away.

Nearby, Jenna was hurriedly casting Serpent Fume, but it was doing little good, only seeming to annoy the Goblin and make it even more deadly. On the other side of the monster, Piers was making good use of his sword, but with little effect. The skin of the Goblin was thicker than almost anything they'd encountered before, and neither weapons nor synergy seemed to have much effect on it. "Garet! Cast Debilitate!" Felix yelled across the battlefield, rolling out of the way of another deadly swipe from the Goblin's club.

Garet nodded and complied; it seemed to have some effect, for now Jenna's spells were creating scorch marks, and Piers's sword looked as if it were drawing blood. Felix cast a hasty Ragnarok, but it took up precious time; it appeared

that the Goblin was using his right arm to target him specifically, and all he had been doing for most of the battle was dodging and running. He felt a flicker of regret as he finished the spell-- it seemed to have hurt the beast, at least slightly, but now its temper was rising all the more. Thanks to the time he had taken to cast a spell, Felix was a second too late in dodging the next swing, and he felt the wind being forcefully knocked out of him as a giant wooden club collided with his chest, sending him flying backwards, where he collided with a small cliff and lay still.

Sheba cried out and hurried forward, signaling to Piers that Felix needed help. Wary of the still-flying clubs, Piers sheathed his sword and retreated, letting Gareth take his place as the guy with the big sword. Ivan and Sheba began to cast Shine Plasma, but to no avail; they were just draining themselves of precious strength while the Goblin continued its rampage.

Jenna made a wordless noise of joy and took a break from her spell-casting to point at the horizon, where Isaac and Mia were hurrying to the rescue. Her strangled cheer, however, was quickly cut off as the Goblin's left club hit her hard in the stomach. Like Felix, she too went flying, landing a good distance away. She didn't get up.

Isaac frowned at the sight before him and ran ahead of Mia, unsheathing his sword in mid-stride. *'Why would a monster be here? And why would it be stronger and larger than usual? Everyone seemed to think that with the lighting, the monsters would vanish. Even you dared to hope that many of your worries were over...'*

"Shut up!" Isaac roared as his sword collided with the Goblin's leg, the sheer force of the blow making the Goblin stumble, though the blade seemed to have barely made a

dent in its thick hide. *'You want me to "shut up"?' The ethereal voice laughed, and like its words its laughter was cruel and cold. 'You don't understand... I am you and you are me. I will never be silenced.'*

"Shut up! I don't want to hear it! Seriously, Mia, this isn't funny!"

Hearing her name, Mia looked up from where she was tending to Jenna a good distance away. "Isaac, I'm not doing anything! Isaac... *Look out!*"

Gritting his teeth in a vain attempt to push aside the pain in his head, he dodged the Goblin's right club, feeling another surge of uncharacteristic irritation. He couldn't believe that Mia was playing games with him at a time like this... Couldn't she see that he was a little *busy* at the moment? It was unlike Mia to act so childish, so cruel... And since when could she talk like that anyway? It was really grating on his already strained nerves.

'Isaac... I want you to cast Ragnarok. Take every ounce of psynergy you have, and cast it. I promise you'll be pleasantly surprised...'

"Goddammit, Mia, I don't have time for this! Leave me alone!" Irritably, he dodged another swing, ignoring Mia's protests and assurances that she didn't know what he was talking about. It was only background noise to him, because the voice was all there was. The voice, and him, and his untapped well of psynergy... The voice, and him, and a power so strong and so terrible that it filled every ounce of his being, overflowing, overflowing... He let it surge into his fingertips, and he laughed, because the psynergetic light was so bright, so fiercely gold, that it was like looking straight into the sun.

He cast Ragnarok as if it was his own psynergy that was controlling him. His power, his magic, itched to be free, itched to be unleashed, desired only to show the world what real strength was. He laughed again as his psynergetic sword crashed into the Goblin and exploded. The resulting light was even brighter than before-- so bright that all of the adepts were temporarily blinded, shocked into standing very still for a moment as the Goblin slowly keeled over in a heap of blackened flesh.

As the smoke cleared, revealing a group of eight very disheveled, smoke-blackened and drained adepts, Garet was the first to recover his power of speech. "Holy crap, Isaac, what was *that*?" His voice was part awe, part concern, and part some alien emotion that Isaac could not place.

'Fear... You remember fear, Isaac, don't you? You helped to save the world, so surely you remember what fear is. And now, now... Now your friends are afraid of you.'

Isaac let out a wordless roar and clamped his hands over his ears, closing his eyes tightly against the red-and-yellow spots that still exploded in his line of his vision. "Stop it! Stop it, please!" He shook his head violently from side to side, not noticing or caring that he had dropped his sword and it now lay in the scorched grass, steaming ever-so-slightly as if it had been nearly melted.

Felix, who was fully healed now thanks to Piers's help, took a hesitant step towards the other Venus adept, holding his hands out palm-up in a gesture of helplessness. "Are you okay...?"

"I'm fine!" Isaac shouted violently, opening his eyes but keeping his hands clamped firmly over his ears. "I'm perfectly fine! Just... I just didn't sleep well." His head was

pounding horribly, and the tips of his fingers hurt, and he couldn't believe he was being *interrogated* at a time like this... Wait, interrogated? Felix had only asked if he was okay, had only shown concern for a friend... *No!* Well, if they wouldn't leave him alone, and give him some space, then he'd just have to get away from them... Right, away... Because his head hurt too much and he couldn't remember why... Because it was over, empty and over, and he couldn't remember anything anymore.

Leaving his sword steaming gently in the early morning sunlight, Isaac whirled around and vanished into the horizon, making his way back towards Vault. The other seven adepts stared after him, shocked into speechlessness.

"What was *that*?" Gareth asked again after a moment, still looking at the spot on the horizon where Isaac had disappeared. He shook his head, sheathing his own sword and taking a few steps forward to where the Venus adept's sword still lay. "He left his sword..." He said quietly, moving as if to lift it, despite the steam that still rose from its blade. However, even as his gloved hands made contact with the hilt, he let out a yelp of surprise and pain, leaping up to cradle his right hand in his left. "It *burned* me!" He cried. "The damn thing *burned* me!"

As the other six crowded around Gareth and the sword, he lifted his injured hand for them to see: Most of his glove had been burnt off into nothing but ashes, little remaining of it except for a few hardy patches. The skin on his palm and fingers was bright red and blistered from the heat, a few drops of blood collecting in the center of his palm. Mia cast a quick Ply, and stared for a moment at the blade. As the adepts watched, the metal began to warp and twist, becoming an unrecognizable heap of silver metal. Even the hilt began to melt, its wrappings disintegrating in a fashion

similar to Gareth's glove. After a few minutes, the metal had liquified itself, becoming nothing but a silvery puddle.

"He melted his own *sword*," Gareth said in awe. "How does that happen?" The others silently shook their heads, still staring at the twisted remnants of a weapon that had lived through saving the world, only to end up in worse condition than the things it had slain to get there.

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It is laughing at him. He doesn't care; why should he? It is not really there... Just a figment of his imagination, a moment of his soul, suspended and never-ending, torturous and cruel. He can make himself not care. It's easier than perhaps it should be.

His hands hurt, so he wraps them in his scarf, cradling them to his chest. There is a breeze blowing in from the north-- from Vale and the ruins-- that tosses his hair into his eyes. He notices without really noticing that it has gotten long, almost like Felix's. His feet pick his way through grass so green it hurts to look at, but he is not really paying attention anymore. Where he is going, why, when... None of it matters so much. He would not die for a where or a when. He would probably not even die for a why.

But that's what the problem is, isn't it? Too many things to die for, too many things *not* to die for, too many things to live and love for that aren't even worth caring about. Too many things, too few things, and they all combine and overlap until he is more confused than he was to begin with. He doesn't mind. It is easy to tangle his thoughts up like this, but it is not easy to undo the knots he makes in the process. The knots are interesting, and complex, and he likes

to take his time in picking them apart. He always has something to do. He is always smiling inside his head.

The sun has risen already, bleeding out across most of the eastern horizon, then drifting westwards, only to be obscured by a clump of storm clouds floating in on the northern breeze. Soon, it will rain. He is glad; he has always loved the rain. It is quiet, and peaceful, and serene. When it comes, they will stop screaming at him and he will no longer listen. When it comes, he might laugh, but he doesn't quite trust himself that much. Nothing is easy like this. Nothing has ever been easy, really; the difference is his eyes.

Through the eyes of a child, everything seems simple and beautiful and pure and right. Through the eyes of an adult, there is failure in every aspect of life, in every living creature and design and thing that could have been beautiful but is not. His eyes are changing, and he is too. He was afraid at first, but there is no use in fearing the inevitable; it won't stop it from happening or lessen the pain when it does. So now he just waits for things to change; drifting, neither child nor adult, neither whole nor broken. It never would have made a difference anyway. He knows. They know. They have always known.

The sky is quickly turning from red to gray, from life to death, as the light slides away, finding rest beneath a blanket of clouds. He is glad. The sun hurts his eyes.

It is whispering in his ear, quieter now, and somehow the decrease in volume makes it harder to block out. It is loud, but still quiet, and it hurts more than the burns on his hands. He does not want to hear. He does not need to; it doesn't really matter. He is afraid again.

The rain is chasing his mind away, and he is running after it, but he can't run when the mud at his feet is reaching up to

entangle him, to pull him down. He has never been able to run properly... Not since that time. Why is he trying? Because he needs to. He wants to catch the wind, wants to race the rain and fall down and get back up and scream and be free. He wants, he needs, he tries, he fails, he sobs, he finds himself sprawled on his back in the still-green grass as water erupts all around him.

He is laughing after all, because he is too far gone to care; he is laughing, only it doesn't matter, and this is all it takes to be free. When it's over, he will be home.

That's all he ever wanted.

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He is tired, but he can feel himself waking, and all he knows is that he just wants to sleep forever. But he can be neither asleep nor awake; he is perpetually drifting somewhere in between the two, neither aware nor unaware of his surroundings; neither living nor dead. And he is so very tired...

The sun-- wait, the sun? It can't be, he hasn't seen daylight in ages-- is burning against his eyelids, scorching his skin. He swears softly, the words halting as they reach his parched lips. He cannot move, and the sun is bright and burning, but he cannot reach out and grab it as he so longs to do--

He is awake.

It is daylight, and he cannot remember how long he has been asleep or how he got here or what happened or why-- all he sees, with his eyes closed, is the Golden Sun, pure and sweet and strong, filling him with power. Yes, power... So much power that his body can barely contain it, that he

longs to let it seep out through his fingers and his toes and poison the earth beneath him. He wants... He wants to test his limits, to find and break all restrictions, to free himself and be lost in the beauty of a new world. He has waited so long.

But he is tired, and his body aches horribly, and his head pounds and there are sharp pains in his shoulder blades. He cannot remember anything, but he knows that he has power, and he knows what he wants but cannot achieve, and he knows that he has never been happy. He knows things but doesn't know them; a cacophony of thoughts drifts through his brain, and it is suddenly so difficult to separate right from wrong, truths from lies, pain from beauty and strength from weakness. He is not afraid; he is alive, and he is powerful. He is not afraid.

Slowly, carefully, gently, he opens his eyes, managing a small smile as he realizes that he is staring straight into the midday sun. He is blinded, and he is smiling, and he is not afraid. He watches the colors explode in his eyes-- red, yellow, orange, gold, white. He lets them fade out and fade in, explode and recede, flare up and die down. He simply watches for several moments, and then he moves.

Cautiously at first-- just the tips of his fingers, his ankles, his mouth. Then he sits up, his eyes making painful objections as they are torn away from their view of the sun.

He smiles, and lifts one arm, then the other, then his legs. He is completely uninjured, though his entire body is covered in rock dust and soil. His clothes are no longer recognizable, and his hair and skin are in no better condition. There are scars on his hands, but he has no recollection of receiving wounds on his palms. His back and shoulders feel very... Strange. It is almost as if a great weight has been dropped over his shoulders, and it cannot be

removed. Whether the weight is metaphorical or physical, he is afraid to find out. He gathers his strength, and attempts to stand... But abruptly falls over.

Confused, he shakes his head in a vain effort to clear it, and tries again. This time he succeeds with the help of a nearby tree, but he feels very wobbly and overbalanced. There is definitely something on his shoulders that shouldn't be there. Hesitantly, he reaches back with his left hand, which abruptly collides with something very solid, sending jolts of pain through his body. Frowning, he tries the same thing with his left hand, encountering the same barrier. He can't tell what it is-- it is uneven, as if it has a bone structure of its own, and it is feathery.

Feathery bone structure? He isn't entirely sure that he likes the sound of that.

He turns his head to get a glimpse of these anomalies, and sinks to his knees, putting his face in hands. He is laughing, and he cannot stop. The sounds spasm through his chest and echo through the trees that surround him, reverberating through branches and returning to his ears, amplified so that they sound louder and even crazier. Because he *is* crazy. He cannot remember how it began, and he does not know how it will end. But he is crazy. He is tired, and he is crazy, and he cannot remember.

But somehow, some way, impossibly, he has sprouted wings. White, fluffy, feathery angel's wings. And if he wasn't sure before, now he knows that he is insane.

The trees close in around him, and the sun on his back begins to crush him, and he is crazy and he is laughing and he doesn't care.

This is the prelude. This is the beginning. This is the New Age, and this is the end.

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***Chapter 3*: Ortus: The Risen are Falling**

Apply standard disclaimers here.

----- DEUS EX MACHINA (*by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya*) ((Written: 5/06/06 Published: 5/20/06)) -----

Chapter Three: Risen (*Falling*)

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He was sleeping, and she didn't want to wake him, but she stood in the doorway, watching him. She braced one hand against the doorframe, the other on her waist, looking impatient even though she could have waited for several years if it were necessary. Her expression was drawn, concerned; her eyes did not look at Isaac, but through him, as if she were trying to see through the floorboards and into what lay beneath. She stood very still, and the only sound was the soft pitter-patter of rain on the roof, which drowned out all else. The weight of her thoughts seemed to fill the room, squeezing out the air and suffocating its occupants. She did not seem to notice.

A flickering flame, held safely within the base of one of the glass lamps bolted to the walls, danced around its invisible cage, forming patterns and designs that cast themselves against the opposite wall, threw their reflections at the ceiling, and then died. It was the only source of light, as the windows were heavily shuttered against the rain and the sun had long since fled anyway. The fire seemed to rebel against its container, making itself larger than it really was, swelling and then shrinking, twisting and twirling around bedposts and wrinkled sheets and Mia's frown. It did not seem to

notice anything else, lost in its own strange dance, desperate to be free.

Mia was worrying. She was not thinking, per se, because thinking involved a conscious effort to find a solution to a given problem or find extra problems in a given solution. No, she wouldn't really call this thinking; it was just worrying, plain and simple. Driving herself insane over a question for which she had no answers, over problems for which she could not even begin to find a solution for. If she would have had a habit of biting her nails, then she would have been doing so now; but her only bad habit, it seemed, was frowning.

She was worrying about Isaac, of course. Everyone else was, too, but it appeared that they were more concerned with breakfast at the moment than helping a clearly troubled comrade. Though, Mia granted, he *was* still sleeping. It wasn't like they could do a whole lot for him now.

Unless...

Her left hand flew from her waist to her mouth as she realized that there *was* something she could do, and it didn't even have to wait until after Isaac had woken up. In fact, this was something that was probably better done while he was still asleep. It wasn't exactly honest, true, but it might give her some clue as to what was bothering him and what she could do to help. Yes, it was dishonest; but it was for his own good, wasn't it? If he was out of control to the extent that he could melt a three foot long piece of quality metal and start yelling for no reason, then something had to be done. Surely Ivan and Sheba would agree.

Her frown deepened for a moment, then her expression lightened slightly as her hand fell back to rest at her side.

He was speaking in his sleep, muttering something, but she couldn't make it out through the sound of the rain--

Abruptly, and without warning, Isaac let out a stifled sort of yell and sat up, as if he'd just awoken to the sight of someone waving a knife in his face. He did not see Mia at first, as the room was quite dark, and he blinked around for a few moments, shaking his head slightly. He'd just dreamt something... Something about... No, he couldn't remember. The details scurried from his mind as he became more alert, and the harder he tried to cling to them, the faster they left him. He stretched slowly, working out the kinks in his arms that came from sleeping on a hard wooden floor. He was so tired now...

Embarrassed at the thought of being caught watching him sleeping, Mia tried to edge out of the room unnoticed, but a few of the lamps in the hallway outside were still burning, and as she moved, so did their light, making Isaac's room slightly brighter.

Noticing this change in aesthetics, Isaac turned toward her silhouette, blinking as his eyes adjusted. "Mia? Is that you?"

"Umm... Yes." Blushing slightly in the darkness, she moved into the room, fidgeting with the hem on one of her sleeves. "I just came to tell you that... Well, everyone's having breakfast now, and since you didn't eat last night... We thought you might be hungry."

"Oh..." Isaac looked confused for a moment, and then his expression cleared as he remembered the night before. "Yeah, I guess I should get something to eat... Tell everyone I'll be right down, okay?" He smiled slightly at Mia's shadow and pulled himself to his feet with help from a nearby bedpost.

"Sure." Still blushing slightly, and glad for the dim light, she retreated into the hallway, and Isaac could hear her soft footfalls as she descended the stairs. He sighed. What was wrong with him, anyway? First weird things started to happen with his psynergy, then he became impervious to small wounds, then he started having weird dreams (though he remembered none of them; he just assumed they were strange, judging from the way he woke and what little he could recollect upon waking). And today, he had begun to hear strange things, causing him to lose his temper with his friends for no reason at all. He sighed again; all he really wanted was for things to be back to normal. Maybe it might have been better for the world to slowly wither away... At least he and his friends could have lived happy, normal lives, and after all, everything had to end sometime... How old was Weyard anyway? Maybe its time was simply up.

He shook his head violently as he dressed in his usual leather armor. What kind of thinking was that? He and eight others had managed to save the world, and he was having doubts as to whether or not they'd done the right thing? It was true that everything did have an ending; nothing was immortal, nothing was forever. But still... If there were a way to prolong anything good (in this case, the world), then shouldn't it be done? Isaac and his friends had not only secured long, happy lives for themselves, but they'd secured the same for many generations to follow. How could that be wrong?

And moreover... Now that they'd lit the lighthouses, it could not be undone. At least, it couldn't be undone without a great deal of unnecessary effort and sacrifice. What would be, would be; it was over and done with now. There was no going back... Not on this, not on anything else. Most of the decisions he made in this life were permanent, which was part of the reason why he thought about them so much. If

you did the wrong thing, made a bad move, then there was truly no going back. For some things it didn't matter, like the decision as to whether he wanted soup or salad with his dinner, but other things did... Like what he said, what he accomplished, where he chose to lead his companions... Any of those things could have terrible, far-reaching consequences, even if they weren't easily understood at the moment he made a decision.

And he didn't believe in fate. The guidance of a higher power, maybe, but not fate. After all, if everything he did was simply fate, then wasn't everything he did pointless? Wasn't the fact that he even existed pointless? Because then he wouldn't be living his own life, he'd be living and acting as fate ordained, having little or no free will to act as he pleased... Maybe that was why people defied "right" and chose "wrong" instead. Maybe... That was why Alex was the way he was. The struggle for freedom, the battle to make your own choices and prove to the world that you were your own person, not a design of fate or God or some other unknowable force. The burning desire to *be* something, to do something, even if it might not be considered just or right... Just to prove that you existed.

Isaac shook his head again. Trying to understand Alex's motivations for doing anything-- large or small-- was quite beyond a scholar like Kraden, much less a teenager like himself. The man was an enigma, pure and simple; at times Isaac doubted whether or not Alex even understood himself.

Pulling on his boots and scarf, he made his way towards the door, feeling distinctly unlike himself. Maybe after one thought way too much, like he had, it started to rot their brain. True, he did enjoy pondering things occasionally, but they usually weren't things like fate or God. Or Alex. Who

would choose to think about Alex, anyway? He was enough to make anyone's head hurt.

Isaac descended the stairs, feeling a bit naked without his sword, which led to a flash of guilt at how he had acted earlier. The voice was gone now-- at least temporarily-- and he owed his friends an apology for his insanity. For now, he pushed aside his worry that he was going insane (or worse) and concentrated on acting normal. Sane. Even if he wasn't.

He found his friends gathered around a few of the inn's wooden dining tables (he noticed with another pang of guilt that several of the tables' legs had been cracked from being thrown across the room, and were now bound with strips of cloth), enjoying a late breakfast of sausage, eggs, and toast. The inn's other tenants had already eaten, not having been delayed by a giant Goblin, though several of them still lingered, sipping juice or coffee and talking softly. As Isaac approached their tables, which had been pushed together so they could eat side-by-side, all of the adepts stopped eating and talking at once, turning in their chairs to face him. He avoided their eyes and looked at their food instead, trying to piece together a decent sentence despite the fact that his words kept coming undone when he tried to string them together. Damn. This was harder than he'd thought it would be.

He was saved the difficult task of breaking the silence by Jenna, who smiled widely at him and pulled out the empty chair next to her, inviting him to sit. "You look hungry. We saved you plenty of food." She gestured towards the centers of the tables, which were still filled with enough food for all of them to have third helpings of everything. "Everyone's taking a day off today, so take your time. You need a break anyway." She continued to smile widely, as if afraid that if

she didn't keep it up, she'd forget to pretend that nothing strange had happened with Isaac earlier that morning.

Isaac gave Jenna a grateful nod, relieved that he could at least put off apologies until he started on some of those sausages. Perhaps with some food in his stomach, he'd feel less dizzy and headachey, and more importantly, he might be able to put more than two words together to form something coherent. He sat down in the offered chair and began to fill his plate with food, ignoring the ill-concealed glances of concern his friends were sharing with each other. Gradually, they began to realize that he wasn't going to set his fork on fire or start yelling randomly, and their chewing and light conversation continued, if a bit more quietly than before.

Isaac waited until everyone else had cleaned their plates and there was a lull in the conversation, not wanting to make his apology any more awkward than it had to be. Jenna and Sheba were discussing the possibility of going swimming in the river once the rain let up, which everyone else seemed to think was a good idea. He wondered a little at the fact that no one had brought up the subject of giant monsters, and whether there were any more around. Privately, he was worried; if monsters this strong were still roaming the countryside, then they could be a hazard to the civilians rebuilding Vale. Usually monsters left you alone if you stayed in your house with the door barred, but there was little shelter to be had in the ruins of Vale, and if another monster came around, he and his friends couldn't guarantee the safety of every laborer. He wondered, also, if that would be a factor from now on in who was willing to help with the rebuilding. A shortage of workers would mean much more time needed to build... He shook his head slightly. He was getting off the topic; he needed to apologize now and not make it any harder on himself.

Hesitantly, Isaac cleared his throat, trying his best not to look like he wanted to crawl under the table as everyone turned to look at him. "Ah... I just wanted to say... I'm sorry for yelling earlier. I just... Really haven't been getting much sleep. I don't know what's wrong with me, and I'm sorry. It won't happen again." *I hope*, he added silently, offering a prayer to whatever God or Goddess might be listening that his mysterious head voice would not return. He nodded extra apologies at Felix and Mia, who had taken the brunt of his strange temper that morning.

Felix smiled and gave a short nod in return. "It's alright. I'm sure we've all been feeling a little out of it since the lighting. Maybe after a day off, you'll feel better."

"Hey, we were going to go out to the river for a swim later, if the rain stops," Jenna joined in. "You should come with us. It'll be fun, and we can forget about our problems for a while."

"Yeah, I think I will." Isaac gave his friends a small smile. He still wasn't truly feeling like himself, but a day out with just his friends did sound like fun. Sort of like it had been... Before... Before everything. Maybe he *would* feel better afterwards. And if not, at least his friends would worry less if he tried to act like his old self. He may have been going insane, but he had no right to make everyone else worry about him when they had enough on their plates. He knew that Jenna and Felix, at least, still had nightmares about the events at Mars Lighthouse. The others, too, were probably busy absorbing the fact that it was all over.

For better or for worse... It was over.

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I am dreaming. I can tell because I am happy, and I am only ever happy when I'm dreaming. I am both outside and inside myself, both acting out the dream and watching myself from above. The air is sweet and warm with the overwhelming aroma of lavender, and when I run, the long grass and moist soil stick to my feet. This is summer somewhere south of where I'm from; somewhere away from the cold and near the warm. The sun is very bright.

Someone is calling my name, only it's not my name but someone else's, tied to me in this dream. I run towards the voice, the grass beneath my feet growing taller and less tamed as I get closer to the source of the lavender smell. There's a little girl there, smiling at me. She is sitting on the bank of a river, neck-deep in grass and weeds and wildflowers, with her bare feet dangling over the edge where the green ends and the blue begins. The river is wide, but I can still see houses on the other side. It runs fast and clear and beautiful.

I smile and sit down next to the girl. Her hair is vibrantly red, and it clashes with the wildflowers that nearly bury it. She is young; maybe seven or eight, I can't tell. There is dirt underneath her fingernails and mud on her clothes; clearly, she likes to spend her time outdoors. Like me. I prefer the cold, though; the snow and sleet, the gray skies, the pure and clean feeling of running through the cold air and feeling it slap you in the face, like waking from a dream that you cannot remember. I have always been tied to the cold, perhaps because all beautiful things begin and end with it. With nothing and cold...

The girl is speaking to me, and her voice comes to me through miles of static, numb and far away. She giggles and jumps in the river, waving me in after her. I follow with a smile; the water is in me, around me, and it feels more

wonderful than anything I could ever imagine. Sometimes I think that my element is all I need; if I were in a room with only water, just water for miles and miles, then I could live forever.

Forever... My dream. My memory. My want.

There is a boy on the river bank, shouting out to us. His hair is red also, and it sticks out in every possible direction, like it can't decide whether it wants to defy gravity or follow it. He jumps in the river with us, and he and the girl start a splashing fight. Soon we are all soaked, and I know my clothes are probably ruined but I don't care. The sun is bright, and it glints off the water, so close to me... I try to grab the sun with my hands, but they meet only water, rushing fast and pure past my fingertips. The sun alights on them instead, dancing across my hands and arms and face and hair. It is everywhere but nowhere; so close and yet untouchable. It is everything I need and cannot have; it is in me and outside of me, nothing and everything...

I used to think that water was all I needed to survive, but that is a lie; I need the sun too, need to hold it and grasp it in order to defy death... To live forever. My dream. My memory...

This is not my dream anymore. It is Isaac's; I am not me but him, and these red-haired children are his friends, and this is his hometown. I am separate from him now; I am drifting away, and as I take one last look at him in the river, the sun alights on his head, and he holds it in his outstretched arms. It fills him, and he stands there, waist-deep in my element, hair dripping, holding the only thing I have ever wanted. He is immortal; he has become me and I have become him, only I never wanted this and he has taken from me everything that should have been mine. He has wronged

me; he thinks he is my opposite, but in reality he and I are the same...

The sun is gone now, replaced by darkness, and I am falling - through cold, through nothing. I am falling, and he is falling too, only he is not here anymore. He will know soon.

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Alex awoke with a start, surprised to find that he really was soaked to the bone. For a moment he felt chilled; had that dream been more real than it felt? But then he realized that it was raining, the cold drops landing on his upturned face and sliding across his cheeks and over his lips. Good; this would help wash some of the blood and dirt away. He was a mess.

Then the pain came; reflexively, he sat up, doubling over as that only increased his agony. He *hurt*. It took him a moment to figure out where, because it was not a location where he remembered ever feeling pain before. It was the *things* on his back; they hurt him like nothing ever had before; hurt him more than his long fall and more than whatever the hell that damn rock had done to him. *Again*. This had to stop. Before Isaac, he resolved to kill the Wise One. With that major obstacle and constant annoyance out of the way, surely a simple second-class adept would be no challenge. He couldn't forget the fact that though half his power had been stolen, he still retained the other half, and that was more than enough to remove anything that stood in his way.

If the Wise One had indeed intended to make Alex a non-issue, then he could have been more thorough. He was still a threat to Weyard, and something about that bothered him. None of this made sense... If that rock wanted to take out Weyard, then why not let Alex just keep all of the golden

sun's power? Granted, it had not really been his plan to eradicate the entire planet (just Vale), but surely he could have created enough havoc to satisfy him. If he had felt like it. But he was still in control, even now; he still had the upper hand, whatever the Wise One chose to think. It had done nothing but put off his dream a little longer, and Alex could be patient enough when he chose. All obstacles considered, this one did not need to be as big as he had first thought. It was just another step up to the top.

His newfound resolve firmly in place, he sat up, fighting against the pull on his back. Those damn things would have to go. Wanting to test his new power anyway, he decided to make an effort towards removing those... *Wing-like* things. Hopefully without hurting himself in the process. But his power was supposedly *nearly* limitless, and that should be more than enough for what he had in mind. If the full golden sun would have made him God, then he was still at least a demigod. Anyone knew that any fraction of infinity is still nearly infinite; infinity is an incomprehensible thing, and since it has no end, any portion of it is still incomprehensible. Therefore, Alex's power was *still* Godlike.

According to the ancient texts he had studied on his journey to ensure that the lighthouses were lit, his power would enable him to shape his surroundings to his will, purely by force of will and Alchemy. He had the power of Alchemy within him now; he could essentially make anything he wanted out of anything else, just by *thinking* about it. Now was as good a time as any to try it out.

Slowly, he stood, accepting help from a nearby pine tree, which held him steady enough despite gravity's best efforts to pull him back down. He concentrated on the structures on his back, visualizing them clearly, closing his eyes to get a full picture. White feathers, soiled with rain and blood and

rock dust. Strong, firm bones and muscles beneath that; when extended, they reached a length of about ten feet all the way across. He could tell just from moving them that they did not only *feel* powerful; they were. With these, he could maybe even achieve man's age-old dream of flying, unaided by any alien structure...

But he wasn't interested in that. He wanted to walk well enough before he even tried to fly; that was the logical, level-headed thing to do. Not the ambitious thing... Perhaps he was feeling a little out of character since the fall. What had that *thing* done to him, anyway?

Putting that aside for the moment, he held the picture of his wings in his mind, not letting it waver, absorbing it until it became his thoughts, until it became all he saw, until he could recall every detail perfectly. Then, tentatively, he reached out with his Alchemy, separating feathers from flesh, muscle from tissue and bones from joints. He felt a tingling sensation in his back, but the weight remained. He continued to picture what he wanted-- to be wingless-- until the mental image was complete. He opened his eyes. At once, he noticed a difference; his wings remained, but they now looked even more bedraggled than before, as if someone had tried to pluck them and then skin them, with limited success. The pain remained, and seemed to be growing in intensity. That shouldn't have been a great surprise, though; trying to change one's physical body was tricky at best, and impossible for any but the most powerful. He knew that it required much practice, and it could be a long time before he could do it successfully.

Sighing, Alex slumped against the tree, sliding to the ground and sitting in the mud again. Despite the fact that it was usually easier in all areas of life to destroy rather than create, he returned his wings to their former state with ease,

even managing to get rid of some of their grime in the process. Of course, nothing could ever be simple... Not limitless Alchemy, not change, not him, not that rock, not anything. He was just confused now; between his previous encounter with the Wise One and what he had said and his dreams afterwards, he had too much to think about. For too long, he had lived a linear life; secretly studying Alchemy in Imil, then doing anything and everything necessary to attain his ultimate goal. Nothing had ever gotten in his way before, and he wasn't sure exactly what to do with this particular problem.

Still, it wasn't the end of his world as he had first thought. No, it was just an interlude; just a brief break in his life. He would find Vale, or the ruins of it, and surely from there he'd be able to find Isaac. He'd pretend to be a reformed villain, and plead for sympathy if necessary, until he was allowed to join Isaac's little group of friends. Then it would be a simple thing to just stick around until the Wise One showed up. If all else failed, he could go looking for it; with his power, surely he could find it with limited effort if the need arose. But first, he needed to devise a plan to kill it, and that would take time and caution. And manipulation, one of the things Alex was best at.

And once the rocky eye was out of the way, he could easily get rid of Isaac. In fact, he didn't even really need a plan for that; all he had to do was fight him. In theory, Isaac was just as powerful as he was, but if the same was true in practice Alex would eat his wings. Despite his travels, Isaac was still unpracticed and uneducated when compared with Alex. He probably had no idea how to use the simplest of his powers, much less fight a man who was nearly a God. No, that surely wouldn't be a problem.

And what would he do after that? He wasn't sure, but with the full power of the golden sun, he could literally do *anything*. He had even fantasized before about creating a new world; a true new world, of his own making. He wouldn't have to just *play* God, either, he could *be* God. With so many possibilities, just thinking about it was mind-boggling, like thinking about infinity. Yes... Infinite life, infinite power, infinite possibilities. He would never again have to fear anything; if he feared fire, he would extinguish it. If he feared being buried, he would make such a thing impossible. If he feared death, then he would never have to worry, because death was an impossibility for the immortal. Well, technically he could be killed, but with Isaac and the Wise One out of the way, what were the chances of that?

Yes... From now on, his life would be good. He would be powerful and immortal and fearless, as he had always dreamed. He would not ever have to die, like Saturos and Menardi had died, like his mother had died, like his grandmother had died, like Mia had nearly died, like Karst and Agatio had died. He would be as he was... Forever.

To live forever. My dream. My memory...

He alone would achieve man's greatest dream of defying death. He alone would be great, as none had ever before been great. He alone would be...

Alone.

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Mia heaved an audible sigh, putting down her cards in forfeit as Ivan increased the bet pool to 1,000 coins. No way would she keep going, not with such a terrible hand and such high stakes.

"Is something wrong?" Jenna glanced at Mia as she tossed a few more coins into the center. "Besides being dealt the worst hand in poker history for the third time, I mean."

"Well, I'm worried about Isaac..." Mia admitted, frowning at the backs of her playing cards. "I know he apologized for earlier, but it still was very strange, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't think about it so much. You know Isaac, he always worries too much," Gareth assured her. "It probably just started getting to him. You know, like a nervous breakup or something."

"Break*down*," Sheba corrected, glancing down at her hand and then up at Piers, who had just raised the bet by 100 coins.

"Yeah, that," Gareth agreed, putting his cards down and sighing much louder than Mia had when she had done the same. "I'm really, really *bad* at this game. You're not cheating with that Mind Read, are you, Sheba?"

"Of course not," She said without missing a beat, abruptly raising the bet by another 100 coins. "You'd be able to tell, remember? You guys can see when Ivan and I use our powers."

"Oh, right." Looking slightly disappointed, Gareth began to shuffle his cards absently, watching as Felix forfeited after seeing the now 1,600 coin bet pool.

"You know, Isaac is worrying me a little too," Piers began, glancing up at Mia. "It wasn't just this morning-- he's been acting strange ever since the lighting. It wasn't that noticeable at first, but I started to suspect something once I realized that he never needs to heal himself anymore, and he can use his psynergy a lot more than the rest of us. And

he's been pretty distant for the past couple of days. I think there might be something really wrong with him, but he won't tell us for some reason. Whatever it is, he's probably trying to get over it by himself, as demonstrated at breakfast this morning. You know he probably wouldn't ask for our help unless he knew that he absolutely needed it."

"Yeah, I think so too." Felix nodded at Piers, frowning at several lines of grain on the table just above where he had deposited his cards. "What is it, though? What's bothering him? We can't *make* him tell us, and I don't see how any of us can help if we don't even know what it is."

Sheba and Ivan cleared their throats loudly at exactly the same time, exchanging glances over their cards. And they had *just* been talking about Mind Reading a minute ago...

For a moment, Mia looked confused at the Jupiter Adepts' interruption, but then her expression cleared. "You want to use Mind Read on him?"

"You think we should?" Sheba countered. "It would solve the problem of us being in the dark about whatever's wrong with him, but it would also be betraying his trust, in a way. Plus, he probably realizes by now that we know something's up, and he can see when Ivan and I use our psynergy. What are the chances he'd just let us go up to him and cast Mind Read?"

There was silence at this. Ivan broke it after a few moments, throwing 500 coins on the table without once changing his facial expression. "But Isaac's sleeping right now... At least, I think he is; he did say he was going to get some more rest after breakfast. If he's not dreaming, we can Mind Read him and we might be able to find out what's wrong. True, people

don't think very clearly in their sleep, but it might be worth a try."

Jenna threw her cards down with a groan. "Man, you guys are *good*! If I didn't know any better, I'd say you *were* cheating. And Piers!" She gave the Mercury adept an accusing glare. "How can you keep up with them? You're a sailor, not a gambler. I think."

"The two go hand in hand," Piers explained with a small smile. "As for the Mind Reading thing, I think it's a decent idea. Privacy is never sacred around Jupiter adepts anyway. In an emergency such as this, it can be violated with no guilt."

"You got that right," Sheba agreed. "After this hand, then? Throw down." She displayed her cards, at which point Ivan fell out of his chair and Piers grew pale.

"How did *that* happen?" Ivan demanded as he gathered up his pride and his overturned chair. "I thought for *sure* you had a worse hand than Mia's."

Sheba shrugged and gave both he and Piers a knowing smile, scooping her winnings into a small leather purse. "Fahran taught me well," she offered by way of explanation.

Piers shook his head. "I think you were a sailor in a past life," he said, gathering cards from the others and shuffling them. "I never lost a game of poker before I met you and Ivan."

Sheba continued to smile, then nodded at the ceiling, towards Isaac's room. "Shall we?" She asked Ivan.

"Yeah." Ivan nodded. "But we should bring someone with us, and share our psynergy so they can read his mind too. If his thoughts are really muddled, like they usually are in

sleeping people, then another person might help us make sense of what's going through his head."

"Good idea," She agreed, looking over the other five adepts. "Mia? You've been especially worried about him, so would you like to come?"

"If you don't mind, I would." Mia looked rather uncertain, as if afraid of what she might find or afraid of causing Ivan and Sheba any trouble. "It might make me feel better. Or perhaps worse, actually, depending on what it is."

"I'm sure it's nothing big," Sheba assured her as the trio ascended the stairs, leaving behind their friends' whispers of good luck. "Garet's right, you know. Isaac really does worry too much. He tries to carry everyone else's burdens on top of his own, and I'm sure it gets the best of him sometimes."

"Yeah..." Mia muttered, lowering her voice as they drew closer to Isaac's room. The door was wide open, which was good because there were no lamps still burning inside the room, so the hall lamps would provide them with enough light so that they wouldn't trip over the very person they were trying not to wake. The three adepts sat down very quietly at Isaac's side. Fortunately, he seemed not to be dreaming; he was resting peacefully, breathing soft and rhythmic.

"Alright, ready?" Sheba whispered, lowering her hand toward Isaac's head. "Ivan, put your free hand on my shoulder or something, so we'll both get the same reading. And Mia, put your hand on my shoulder too. Okay, on three. One, two, thr--"

There was a very loud snapping noise, as if a karate champion had just sliced a board in half with their bare hands. At once, all four adepts began to scream, though the

sound was barely noticeable above the roaring in their ears. They could feel themselves falling, falling through cold nothing, falling forever--

And everything faded out.

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He is running through snow; deep snow, not snow like they usually get in Vale. It is up to his knees, though he is only a child. His boots are soaked through, and he begins to worry about frostbite, because he knows that he is still a long ways away from the village and warmth. And he does not know how to start a fire on his own; all his studies with Mia and his grandmother have not taught him that. The only spell he knows is Ply, and he can't even use it well without exhausting himself. He does not know yet that he is one with the ice and snow; he does not realize that for him, frostbite is an impossibility. After all, he is only child.

But he is growing tired now. His boots slip through the snow, which in places has hardened into ice. His legs are short and they need at least half an hour to cover the same distance that his grandmother can travel in fifteen minutes. He is just afraid that someone will realize that he is gone, and he will be punished for going to visit the sacred lighthouse alone. The others do not see it in the same way that he does; they do not see its beauty and majesty. They only fear it, and respect it because of the fear it instills upon them. They realize that it is their ancient duty to protect it, but they don't understand that they can't protect it if they don't know anything about it.

But he knows. He only just began to read a little over a year ago, but he is getting better. And he likes to explore, not only read, so he knows a lot more about the lighthouse

already than he should know. He knows about Alchemy, and Mt. Aleph, even if he doesn't understand yet what it all means. The knowledge is in his head, just waiting for the experience that will unlock it. He knows, if nothing else, that he is special, and the lighthouse wants him to know. It wants him to be the one to wake Imil from its frozen slumber.

He is still running, and as the winter sky grows into a deeper gray, he knows that the sun is setting. He grew up being told horror stories of travelers who wander cold woodlands at night and never wake in the morning. He is not frightened yet; he has never been afraid of the cold, because even now he knows that it is not a bad thing. He is worried, though, because of the monsters. He is too young to carry a weapon, and all he has is a little pocketknife. His father was killed by a bear when he was very small, so that he knows enough to fear.

As he runs, he realizes that he hates this emotion, fear. Why fear? Because the bears will eat him. Why will they eat him? Because he is invading their territory alone, and they are hungry. It is their way. If only he were big and strong, like the men in his Alchemy books... Big and strong like the ones who sealed away Alchemy forever. Then he'd be able to just kill the bears, and then he'd have no reason to fear them. He hates being afraid, because it makes him feel weak, and he never wants to be weak. He will never be weak.

Gradually, he becomes aware that this is not his body, or his mind, and these are not his thoughts and this is not his home. He belongs in Vale, in warm summers and mild winters and perfect springs and falls. He belongs where the rivers run instead of freezing, where the snow melts as soon as it hits the ground and it rains all the time. These strange thoughts-- weakness, fear, secrets, knowledge-- frighten him. He wants to go home.

Home. Home...

He remembers now; his home is gone, destroyed by a mountain. He is gone, destroyed by himself, and why is he having these dreams anyway? He never even knew Alex, never even cared enough to know him.

Alex... The name sounds oddly familiar, as if there is something more to it that he should know but can't quite recall, as if he were someone very important only he can't remember why. He wants the dream to continue, now; he wants to see the boy's face, to see if it's the same Alex or just his mind playing tricks on him again.

He is so close now, so close to everything and nothing-- so very close--

And it's fading now, slowly at first, then faster until it's spinning out of control, spiralling, screaming, nothing--

Then darkness. Blank, silence, nothing, peace...

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***Chapter 4*: Animadverto: Mind Over Matter**

A/N: By the way, in case you hadn't figured this out yet, this story is not exactly in perfect keeping with canon. Even though it is set after TLA, and therefore almost anything I want to write about is purely up to my imagination, I have changed a few key things that happened throughout the games; nothing huge, but just enough so that I can steer this story in the direction that I would like. Just something to keep in mind. *DEM* is not an AU, per se, but it does differ ever-so-slightly from a few canon happenings in the games.

Apply standard disclaimers here.

(Edit 6/25/06: Many thanks to Dracobolt for catching a couple of mistakes that I failed to notice in my editing. They're fixed now.)

----- DEUS EX MACHINA (by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya) ((Written: 5/19/06 Published: 6/23/06)) -----

Chapter Four: Mind (*Matter*)

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He did not even realize at first that he was re-gaining consciousness. It felt as if he had been asleep for a very long time; not a regular sleep, but some chronic unconsciousness, like a coma. He could remember Venus lighthouse; he and Menardi and those damn kids, trying to "save" the world... He could remember fusing, and falling, and everything after that was simply a blank. He had no idea how much time had passed, or where he was, or what had become of Menardi. He could remember, now that he

thought about it, a great golden light calling him back from his sleep... It was that light, he knew, that had resurrected him, but he didn't know what it was or where it had come from or how it had the power to revive.

Saturos shifted, trying to recall how it was that his limbs worked, and what exactly he was supposed to do with them. He couldn't see, but that didn't really bother him at the moment; if this was Hell, then he'd rather not see what it was like. It didn't really feel like Hell, though; he wasn't in any pain, although his entire body-- if he even still had a body and wasn't imagining that part-- was rather numb. He was having difficulty moving. That was probably a common side effect of being dead.

Slowly, his senses began to return, a little at a time. He realized that wherever he was, it was cool and damp, and dark, and hard, and it smelled like soil after a spring rain. There was no sound except for that of his own soft breathing, and the dull pitter-patter of what sounded like water on stone. After being asleep for so long, all these things overwhelmed him; it was difficult to take it all in, to process all this information when it was coming at him from all sides. For the moment, he was content to just lie there-- wherever there was-- and absorb this new development. He was alive. That was unexpected. Then again, he'd never really expected to die. All humans retain the knowledge that they *will* die, eventually; but somehow it's never something they truly expect or accept as inevitable. They have the knowledge, but they choose to never comprehend it until it's way too late. That was just the human way, he supposed. Ignore all bad things until they actually happen to you.

Yeah, Alex had been right all along-- today's civilization was a wreck, a mere shadow of its former self. Hearing Alex talk about what things had been like before Alchemy was sealed

had aroused some interest in Saturos. By the time he and Menardi had reached Venus lighthouse, he had no longer wanted to light the lighthouses simply to save Prox-- he wanted to see the world that the Mercury adept talked about so animatedly. He wanted to see a new world. A New Age, a new beginning. Too bad he had to die, really... If only he had been there when the golden sun blazed and died... He would have liked to see that before his death.

And what about Menardi? It was one thing for Saturos to die-- he probably even deserved it-- but she had wanted to live too, not only for Prox but for the world. It wasn't fair that she had to die. Too many lives had been lost for the sake of one damn quest... All the Proxans that had died that night in Vale, then he and Menardi... He wondered what had become of Karst and Agatio. Had they taken up his battle after his death, as they had sworn? If so, he hoped that nothing terrible had become of them... Surely they and Felix and Alex were successful in forging a new world. Yes... Surely the price for saving the world should not be so great. Surely he would not grow to regret his decision... Surely they had done the right thing.

"...Saturos?" A voice, harsh and hoarse from months of disuse, cut through his reverie, and Saturos was startled into involuntary movement, hitting his head hard on something above him as he tried to sit up by reflex.

"Menardi?" He inquired wonderingly, trying to see through the darkness that surrounded him, looking for the source of the voice. It couldn't be... She was dead too, wasn't she?

"You're alive?" The voice returned, sounding equally surprised. He could hear someone moving a ways away, and their movement caused a small avalanche near his feet, showering them with several pebbles. "Oh, sorry," The voice

continued, the movements ceasing. They were obviously in some kind of tiny cave, buried in a few layers of rock somewhere. But how had that happened? None of this made sense... He knew that he was dead, but this didn't seem at all like any kind of afterlife.

"*You're* alive?" Saturos countered. "Where are we?"

"I don't know... I thought we were dead after that fall. Then I saw this light, and woke up here... Maybe we survived?"

Saturos made a small movement that could have been considered shaking his head in less cramped quarters. "I didn't think we did, but I guess it's possible... Is there a way out of here? Maybe if we could find the surface, we could find some answers as well." He flexed his fingers, trying to get used to the feeling of moving them so he could attempt to shift some of the rock that encased him.

"I tried. There's no way out on my end, or if there is, I can't find it. What about over there? I think I see some light over where those rocks fell." Menardi checked the rock slabs on either side of her again, but they remained secure. She tried to kick out at the slab at her feet, and this time a slightly larger avalanche ensued, pelting the couple with small stones. "There! I *do* see light. Try to move that rock, Saturos, I think you're closer to it than I am."

He obeyed, remembering just before he raised his head that there was rock right above him. This would take some careful maneuvering. Slowly, he crawled towards the small shaft of light using his hands and feet to the best of his ability. When he drew close enough, he gave the wall the best kick he could muster, praying that this action wouldn't bring the cave down on them, burying them for good.

He was in luck. Instead of buckling, the wall let loose another stream of rocks, and the small opening grew larger. He could fit his fist through it now, and perhaps dig them out-- if he could just get his fist close enough. The light outside was poor-- more gray than gold, like that of a cloudy day-- but it definitely increased the light quality inside their small chamber. If he squinted, Saturos could see the rock that surrounded him, and a vague shape a ways away that resembled one of Menardi's legs. It was helpful to be able to see what he was doing. He edged closer to the opening, trying to shift himself sideways, enabling him to dig with his hands so he would have a smaller risk of causing the chamber to collapse. Eventually he succeeded, and began to tear at the rock with his bare hands, trying to work quickly but carefully. He hated the feeling of being trapped.

The feeling of cool rainwater on his hands was wonderful, and he smiled as he worked, glad to be back in a world where he could smell and feel a fresh spring rain. Wait... Spring? It had been late fall when their journey had ended, right? How much time had passed, anyway? He thought about the lighthouses as he worried away a large stone-- the pure light of Mercury, the powerful light of Venus, the light of whatever he had seen before his resurrection... If it was truly spring now, and so much time had passed, then perhaps the New Age Alex had dreamed of had already begun... And he and Menardi would get to see it after all.

As several stones broke free, the hole widened to about the size of Saturos's head, big enough at least so that he could make out some of the outside world. It was raining, of course, so visibility was diminished, but it appeared that they were buried in ruins of some kind. All he could make out from here was heaps of rubble and stone, as if a mountain had collapsed upon them. Were they in the ruins of Venus lighthouse? It didn't look like it, but if they were

really alive, that seemed like the obvious place, didn't it? Coming back to life was mystery enough without them having been transported away from the area in which they had died. Life was too complicated anyway.

Saturos continued to work in silence, aware of Menardi watching him. His hands were beginning to blister and tear from dealing with sharp edges and coarse surfaces, but he didn't mind. The rain washed away his blood and soothed his blisters, so it wasn't so bad. After several hours, his hard work was rewarded: he had created a hole large enough-- though just barely-- for someone of slim build to slip through.

"Menardi?"

"Hmm?"

"I think we can get through now. Can you make it over here after I get out, or do I need to move some of the other rock around you?"

There was the sound of movement again, and he could see Menardi's shadow as she raised a hand to test how high the rock above her head was. "I think I can make it, if I'm careful. You'll have to go first, though. If I need help I'll tell you."

"Alright." Saturos agreed, raising his head slightly and tilting it so it passed easily through the hole. Then he was able to sit up completely, feeling ridiculous as he sat in the rain with only his top half unburied. Carefully, he freed his arms and hands, pushing gently on the ground in order to pull himself up. This done, he stepped slowly away from the opening, not wanting to do anything to disturb the delicate balance of the chamber while Menardi worked herself free. This was a more difficult feat than it seemed: his legs and feet still did not seem to work the way they used to, and the

ground was littered with jagged stones, making for uneven footing. Deciding against taking any more steps than absolutely necessary, he seated himself on a nearby rounded stone, watching as Menardi's face emerged from the hole.

"You look terrible," she said with a grimace as she saw him, struggling to fit her arms and shoulders through the opening. "Covered in blood and rock dust..."

"You don't look any better," Saturos shot back dryly. "We've been buried for months, God knows where." He glanced pointedly around at the surrounding area, which was nothing but rock as far as the eye could see. In the distance, the outlines of a mountain range could be seen, nearly concealed by a veil of rain and mist.

Menardi said nothing more, but simply worked on pulling her legs out. Once free, she stood and stretched luxuriously, enjoying, no doubt, the ability to move once more. This done, she stumbled over to the rock on which Saturos sat and seated herself next to him, grimacing as she realized that she was absolutely *coated* with dust and blood. Her clothes were in tatters, her scythe was nowhere to be found, and she appeared to have accumulated a miscellany of bruises and abrasions. Her hair hung down in a rather depressed way, dyed gray-brown by rock. Saturos really was no worse, though; he seemed to be in a similar state of disrepair. Whatever they had gone through had really taken its toll on both of them.

The couple sat in silence for a few moments, enjoying the rain as it coursed across their upturned faces and hands. "Well... What do we do now?" Menardi raised the obvious question, reclining on the rock and using her hands to support her weight.

Saturos shook his head. He raised a finger in reply, pointing off to the north where a humanoid figure was moving in their direction. *Humanoid*, Saturos decided, was a good word choice: the thing looked like a human, and moved like a human, but there was something not quite right about it. It had oddly shaped things sticking out of its back, for one thing, and he could tell even from this distance that the thing seemed to be struggling with them, as if they weighed him down far too much. "Maybe... *That*... Can at least tell us where we are."

Menardi nodded, squinting in an effort to get a better look at the thing. "What's wrong with it, though?" She asked with a grimace. "It looks... Strange."

Saturos inclined his head at this. "But human," he decided, watching it draw closer. The couple studied the oddly lopsided figure as it struggled to get over the rubble with whatever was on its back. After a while, they could discern that whoever it was was just as dirty and grimy and bloody as they were. Its clothing was far beyond salvaging, and its long hair had lost all its color from the layers of rock dust which covered it. The gigantic things that seemed to be strapped to its back stretched out about three or four feet on either side of him, measuring over a foot wide where they branched out from his back, and then tapering down to a point where they reached the end of their horizontal span. They also looked slightly crooked-- they were bent somewhat in the middle. Oddly, Saturos could tell that they were white; somehow they had survived the grime in which the person carrying them was covered. The said person was tall, and looked vaguely male, but it was difficult to tell for sure through the rain and poor light.

He and Menardi exchanged glances, each thinking that if this man was just as decrepit as they were, then maybe he

had somehow suffered the same fate. It did look likely, but Saturos had to wonder what the chances of that were. Something about the man's silhouette brought the words "angel of death" to mind, and he frowned, squinting at the structures on his back. Yup. Wings. Angels' wings. Well, he had seen stranger things.

The man-- definitely a man, Saturos could tell now-- drew to a stop several feet away, the dust on his face which the rain failed to wash away and the curtain of rain which separated them making it difficult to see any of his facial features. He seemed to be studying them, however, taking in their state of disrepair, similar to his own. His wings moved at the place where they were crooked, lifting up several inches and then relaxing again, coming back down. Silence stretched between the three for a few moments, and then the man began to laugh. It wasn't normal laughter stemming from mirth, but half-crazed, hysterical laughter, tearing through his chest with a strange ferocity until he was on his knees, gasping for breath. He tried to speak through his laughter, but his words were swallowed by the horrible sounds.

"...Thought... You... Lighthouse," Saturos could make out between breaths and laughter. Not sure whether to be annoyed or just uncomfortable, he glanced at Menardi, who was staring at the stranger with evident distaste.

The man eventually seemed to regain his composure, struggling to his feet again and using part of a tall rock to support his weight. He continued to laugh, grinning in a not-quite-sane way, and covering his mouth with one hand. Another few moments passed before he attempted to speak again. "It's been a long time... Saturos, Menardi."

The Proxans exchanged glances again.

"Do you remember?" He asked, smothering a giggle with his raised hand. "No, I suppose you wouldn't, not after being dead..." With this, he resumed laughing hysterically, as if this was some huge joke. And perhaps it was. Saturos frowned. Something about the man's voice was slightly familiar, but in life he had never known anyone with wings, and he was so dirty that he wouldn't be able to tell even if it were Puelle who stood before him.

"Ah, no..." The man struggled to keep his laughter under control. "No, perhaps I am unrecognizable... Tell me, Saturos, Menardi... Do you remember an Alex of Imil?"

Menardi could not stifle her gasp of surprise, and Saturos stood up so fast that he nearly fell over again. "Who are you?" he demanded, squinting through the rain. "Are you Alex?"

"Indeed." The man inclined his head, still struggling to keep his hysterics unvoiced. "You were more dead than I was," he managed with great effort. And with that, he collapsed.

As Saturos knelt beside him, he could tell that he was really the Alex he had known, though the rock dust and wings did make it slightly difficult to tell. How far had he come? Had he succeeded in lighting the lighthouses? Something twitched in his stomach as he realized that he might never know now.

Alex wasn't breathing.

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All Mia could think upon waking was that her head really, really hurt, and she was more nauseous than she had been when she'd had her first bout of seasickness. She couldn't tell where she was, and part of her wasn't at all interested in

knowing. Wherever it was, it was cold, and very quiet, and she was lying on what seemed to be a slab of stone. Yes, she'd keep her eyes closed, thank you. Especially when the last place she remembered being was the cozy bedroom in Vault's inn. If she had simply fallen asleep, then she would wait out this dream till she awoke, never moving or opening her eyes. She didn't want to know. Wherever she was, it was starting to really creep her out. She didn't want to know...

"Mia! Are you okay?" So much for that idea. Someone-- it sounded like Sheba-- was calling her, and she rose to meet the voice, drifting rather than moving towards it, rising out of unconsciousness and into reality. Or whatever reality seemed to be at the moment.

"Yeah, I'm okay," She answered groggily, sitting up slowly, afraid to move too fast lest her nausea overwhelm her.

"Where... Are we?" Well, it was the inevitable question, after all. As she inched her eyes open, she became quite sure that this wasn't Vault. Or anywhere else on Angara, for that matter. She was indeed lying on what seemed to be smooth gray stone, which was all that surrounded her for what looked like miles. The sky was dark, but starless, and the only source of light was a crimson glow emanating from the horizon. Ivan and Sheba were seated nearby, looking rather dazed.

"I don't know." Sheba shook her head, puzzled. "I tried to read Isaac's mind, but I couldn't... All I remember was that it *hurt*, like he had some overactive shields set up or something. Then... Something snapped, and I woke up here." She glanced at Ivan, who mimicked her head shake and averted his gaze to study the strange horizon.

Mia shivered slightly, frowning at her surroundings. The three sat in silence for what seemed like hours, as the

crimson light gradually grew stronger. Ivan was the first to speak, voicing the thought that was on all their minds: "So, what do we do now?"

Sheba stood abruptly and began to pace back and forth, covering only several feet before turning around. "Like we have any idea... I don't even know how on earth this is even *possible*."

Mia nodded agreement. "I've never heard of Psynergy going wrong like this." "Unless it wasn't Psynergy that got us here," interjected Ivan quietly. "It might have been something to do with Isaac himself. Like Piers said earlier, he has been... A little *off* lately."

"Isaac is fine," she replied quickly, something in the Jupiter adept's tone making her unease grow into irritation. "He had to lead most of the journey to save Weyard, doing most of the work while we played relatively minor roles next to him. He had to take most of the responsibility, and it was a long journey. Give him a break. I'm sure he'll be fine, in a few days. If we'd just given him more space, he'd probably be fine already."

Ivan was silent at this, a bit taken aback by Mia's sudden defensiveness and her brief speech. "Mia, you just contradicted yourself," he said at last. "Should we help Isaac by being there for him or by giving him space?" When Mia did not reply, he continued. "Isaac's behavior isn't our fault. All through that journey, he could have let us in, but he didn't. He chose to bear his burden alone, despite our best efforts to help. We did do our part in that journey, too, as did Felix, Garet, Jenna, Piers, and Kraden. We all fought; it was not Isaac alone who needed to save the world. If he is only now feeling the effects of the stress he suffered, then he cannot be the only one. Felix and Jenna nearly killed their

own parents. Piers lost his mother. Sheba had to leave her home town and everyone she knew, and she never did find out her true origins. You suffered through Alex's betrayal of the Mercury clan. All of us lost something or left something behind. Isaac is strong; I believe there is more to his actions lately than the after-effects of our quest. I think something else is wrong, and now more than ever, he needs our help."

"You're right," Mia sighed, studying the stone beneath her. "I'm sorry. It's just... I just hope we can get back to him quickly, so we... We can help him." She didn't say what she was really thinking: she hoped they could get back to him before something happened. Before he did something he might regret.

Ivan smiled. "We will."

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He can't remember ever being this cold. Does it ever even snow in Vale? He can't remember that either. All he knows is that he is cold, really really cold, so cold it hurts. How does Alex stand this kind of cold? It is burning its way through his skin, surely poisoning him, after his life and blood and heartbeat. He no longer has the strength to run. Towering above him, through a tapestry of tall snow-dusted pines, is the lighthouse. It is very beautiful when it is lit, blue and green and white and lovely and serene. The sight might have taken his breath away, if he had any breath left to give.

He remembers a few things. He remembers fighting Saturos here. He remembers meeting Mia and Alex... He remembers how cold it was back then, too, and Gareth's fire warming them all when they fought. He remembers beating Saturos, but he remembers only defeat as the beacon blazes,

blinding him and bleaching the scenery out for miles and miles around. It is even more beautiful atop the lighthouse, he knows: frozen ocean waters, jagged gray mountains, blue-white lakes and rivers, green-white forests, and her smile. He remembers how much she loved it here; her hometown, her family and friends...

He cannot remember anymore if there was anything he did throughout his entire journey that was good. He remembers losing Jenna's entire family, and his father, and being defeated for the first time by the Proxans that would later be remembered as glorious martyrs. He remembers his mother's grief, and his own, and the way he and Jenna would stand on the edge of the river on sunny days, looking into it for so long that their eyes began to burn, hoping against hope that the things they had lost would suddenly rise out of the glistening water, laughing and joking once more. He remembers trying to sleep at night, a pillow over his head to block out his mother's sobs. He remembers tears very, very well. Gareth could never understand the way he and Jenna did. Gareth still had some kind of happiness. Gareth had not lost everything.

He remembers, then, the return of Saturos and Menardi, with Felix. Jenna's mixed joy and dismay as she finds out that her brother is alive, but as one of them... He and Gareth fetching the elemental stars, being forced to surrender them to Alex as Jenna and Kraden are kidnaped. He remembers their near-death experience as they flee from the Elemental Star Room after their abducted friends.

That was his first big mistake, he figures. Because he was not strong enough, or brave enough, or good enough, he allowed his teacher and best friend to be taken away by the villains. Not only that, but he allowed those villains to escape with the devices necessary to destroy the world--

the elemental stars. That, he knows, was a monumental failure on his part.

After that... Well, it all went downhill from there. He left his mother alone and ill, while tearing Gareth away from his family. Then, of course, Ivan had to come along, against his wishes, he is sure, to stay with Hammet. Because he was stupid enough to let Saturos and Menardi get away, he let all the people of Kolima be turned into trees, and they almost weren't saved. He let Mercury lighthouse be lit, the first step towards destroying saving the world. He took Mia away too, and he remembers that as she left Imil, she had to turn away from him and bite back tears. He allowed Hsu to be crushed by a boulder, which could have killed him. He allowed all the soldiers at Suhalla Gate to die, and many, many other things...

He has almost lost count of all the mistakes he has made. Sometimes he tries to tell himself that he truly has, but he knows that is a lie; he will never, ever forget all the horrible things he has done. Even if he cannot list them all at once, he remembers. He knows. He grieves.

He knows that he, Mia, Gareth, and Ivan were not welcome in Prox. He knows that they never will be, because they were solely responsible for the "tragic" deaths of the heroes Saturos and Menardi, who, like them, fought only for a better world... And lost.

He is no longer cold. He burns, inside and outside, with the knowledge of what he has done and what he has yet to do. How can the people of Weyard possibly look up to him? How can he be considered a hero? It was Felix and his friends who were the heroes all along. Yet Felix still remains in his shadow, as if he had not done all the real work. He is tired of taking credit. He is tired of being the hero, because he

knows that he will never be a true hero. He hurts, and he burns, because he knows what they do not know or do not choose to think about. He is tired of himself.

The lighthouse stands directly in front of him now, blue brick winding up, up, up, into the clouds and snow. Without really knowing why, he begins to climb, step after step, the cold slowly fleeing from his limbs, leaving him with only sorrow and shame. He knows that this is important, but only because he remembers and does not really know, only because he is a stand-in for fate, and he is waiting for his hand to be dealt. He knows, already, how this will end.

He knows that it must have taken him a long time to reach the Aerie, but it does not feel so long, as if the climb were a dream, only remembered vaguely upon waking. At first he thinks that he is only remembering: Mercury Lighthouse, Venus, Jupiter, Mars. At first he thinks that he is only still dreaming.

Then: "Isaac!"

He gives a small involuntary jerk of surprise as he hears his name. He realizes that he is not there: it is only Felix, Jenna, and Alex. He is not remembering, then. But something is wrong; Jenna is brandishing her staff and her eyes are blazing, the way they get when she's really mad. Felix is looking solemn, sword drawn, body very still. Alex is just Alex, a stream of water writhing above his extended left hand, twisting through the cold air without freezing. His face is expressionless.

Isaac reaches for his sword just to make sure that it is there, but his hands encounter nothing but empty air. He is weaponless; all he has is his Psynergy. He stares at Felix,

Jenna, and Alex, taking a small step backwards. Something is wrong here... This can't be right. This can't be happening.

Felix and Jenna advance on him, weapons extended, eyes empty of all emotions but anger. He is uncomfortably aware that fighting on the Aerie makes retreating impossible: one wrong step and he'll be falling to the cold ground below. Nervously, he raises his left hand, gathering a bit of psynergy in his palm: not enough to harm his friends, but enough to defend himself. "What are you doing?" He asks them, but his voice betrays him. The words come as a whisper, nearly lost to the wind and snow.

"Avenging our parents' deaths," Jenna replies, a small smile working its way across her face. "You said you knew what you were doing from the moment you lifted your sword, didn't you? Didn't you, Isaac?"

"You killed your own father, too," Felix says quietly, taking another step towards him. "Without remorse, you lifted your sword against three of the kindest people we ever knew. You hurt your mother. You hurt us. You hurt yourself, and you don't even realize it."

Isaac tries to move back again, but experiences a brief moment of panic as his left heel finds nothing but air. He stumbles, regains his balance, and steps slightly forward and to the side, heart racing. "Felix... Jenna... I'm sorry... To save Weyard, I--"

"Shut up!" Jenna hisses through her teeth. "No more excuses! No more tortured hero! You're not sorry; you're not sorry at all! How could you be? How could I have ever thought that you understood me?" Despite her anger, her eyes fill with tears, mixing with the snow that falls across her cheeks and melts, trailing across her face.

Felix shakes his head. "This is a mistake that you can't take back, Isaac. Not now. Not ever. You knew what you were doing, so you should have been prepared to face the consequences."

"But I--" Isaac stares into his friends' eyes, trying to find within them even a spark of forgiveness, even an ounce of the people they have been. But his search is fruitless-- their eyes are cold and dark, their expressions telling him everything he needs to know. Right here, in the wind and snow and blinding white, it will end. Right here, so far above Weyard and everything he has never been, they will kill him. "...I never meant for that to happen," He concludes quietly, defeated. So this is it, then. The end of his journey... The end of a hero who has never really been a hero. "I'm sorry," He adds, staring now at the bricks beneath his feet. He is sorry, but he can see that it doesn't matter.

"Like that changes anything!" Jenna cries, eyes narrowed, staff extended so that its tip is mere inches from his chest. "Like you can undo it all just by wishing you can! Like it ever made any difference for anyone! I can't believe we ever trusted you, Isaac. After all that you've done... I just can't believe it..." There are tears in her eyes now-- angry, indignant tears. He does not know who this girl is, who looks and talks and cries like his childhood friend, but it is not her. It can't be. He cannot believe that it ends here.

Felix raises his blade and holds it next to his sister's staff, so close to Isaac's flesh that he can feel their tips biting into his clothing. And now, he is feeling something again that he thought he would feel no longer: fear. He is afraid to die, afraid to fall from atop this lighthouse, afraid to shatter like his dreams, afraid to be hurt by his comrades. He has never been so afraid, shaking in the winter cold, looking down and away. Afraid.

Suddenly, Alex steps forward, parrying Felix's and Jenna's weapons with his own. He is smiling, but there is no humor in the gesture; it is empty and desolate, cold and terrible. Something about it makes Isaac shiver all the more. He does not want to die at the hands of this man, either; true, he never really knew him, but he knows just from seeing his face that Mia was right. He is evil.

"Isaac..." Alex says softly, twisting the word so that it is almost a curse, a bitter-sounding thing. He moves his thin silver blade up to Isaac's chin, and meets his eyes. The Venus adept is startled; he sees only blue. Pure, hard blue, and anger, and fear, and hatred. He sees too much, and involuntarily he takes a half-step backwards, remembering too late that he is only inches from the edge of the Aerie. Before he can react, before he can even cry out, he is falling, gravity pulling him down more quickly than he would have thought possible.

But Alex is faster. Before gravity can do its job, he brings one foot down hard on Isaac's hand before he can fall, holding him up, if only barely. He is still smiling; enjoying, perhaps, this power over whether his enemy lives or dies. "Isaac..." He says again, and laughs. There is a manic gleam in his eyes. "Aren't you going to fight this, Isaac?" He asks, still laughing. His hair and clothing are dusted with snow, and as the wind picks up, both are tossed about wildly, making him look almost surreal... An agent of destruction. So this is it, then...

"Aren't you going to fight?" He repeats, and the heel of his boot digs deeper into Isaac's hand. He can't help it; he lets out a small yelp of pain. Alex smiles. "No, you aren't going to fight me, are you? You're just going to sit back and let this happen, because you know deep inside that it was meant to be. I was meant to live, and you were meant to die... You

know that, don't you? That's why I fought so hard for this power, this opportunity... I fought so hard to stay alive, whereas you fought for nothing, only a fool's dream of a world without change. You'll never understand, because you were raised in Vale; a town of blind idiots who wouldn't raise a finger to save the life of an innocent man if it meant sacrificing tradition. These people, these damn poor fools, were so content with everything and nothing that they could let the world slowly fade away without feeling an ounce of regret. They are afraid of change, and in the end, that will destroy them. This new, lit world will not permit those people to live. Only those capable of moving forward, of advancing, of living, will be allowed to shape Weyard's new image. As it should be..."

Alex takes a deep breath and the pressure of his foot lets up a little, as if he were caught off-guard himself by his own words. But he continues after this brief pause, blue eyes boring into Isaac's through a thin curtain of snow. "When they told me I was going to die, I didn't believe them at first. I'd spent my entire life devoted to change, to life, and now it would all be for nothing? Can you imagine, even for a moment, Isaac of Vale, how that feels? To be told by simple village people that you can never be cured, never be saved? I knew from a young age that I was destined for greater things than that. I would not die in that snow-bound town, just another name on another headstone, fading into anonymity. I knew that there had to be a way to save myself, to improve myself, to rise even greater than before. I remembered the Golden Sun, and the lighthouses, and I knew how I wanted to live. I knew that that was what I needed: to live forever, with infinite power and influence, capable of shaping an entire world based on my own desires. Can you imagine, Isaac? Knowing that everything you ever wanted is within your grasp..."

"It sounded too good to be true, and in a way it was. Because you and that damned rock who calls itself 'wise' nearly took that dream from me. Now, I am here to take back what is mine... It is no less than you deserve, after all that you've done to me, to your beloved friends, to Saturos and Menardi, to everyone you ever knew. Now, Isaac, it is your time to die, and my time to live... As it should be."

And suddenly, Isaac is aware that the weight of Alex's foot is gone, and his hand is burning. He is falling through wind and snow, terror clawing its way through his chest and burying itself deep within his heart, making it race and beat faster and faster until he thinks that it will simply stop or explode from the pressure. He has never felt an adrenaline rush like this, horror and realization flooding him until he is screaming, curling his body up into a ball to avoid the bite of the wind as he falls. He is screaming and sobbing into the blank nothingness of his hands, falling, he can't imagine how far down the ground is, can't imagine how far he has yet to fall, can't imagine that he is dying like this--

A bright crimson light explodes behind his eyelids, and then there is nothing again. He is very relieved.

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Mia gazed off into the distance, which wasn't much to look at, really; just a flat line of stone intersecting with a sky that was tinted crimson. Having grown up in Imil, she was used to trees and mountains, and the flat nothingness unnerved her. The fact that she was even here unnerved her. Magic and everything else aside, she wasn't sure that this was reality. Yeah, teleportation was possible to some extent, but she had never heard of someone being suddenly transported from one place to a completely different, far-away place against their will. Besides, the sky was supposed to be blue, and

never before had it been red. Could a place like this truly exist? And if so, how had they come to be here? She shifted her weight, resting her chin on her hands. Nearby, Ivan and Sheba also made restless movements, anxiously waiting for something-- anything-- to happen.

Mia squinted. The crimson light seemed to be growing brighter on the western-- or what she thought was western-- horizon. She racked her brain for any memory of a place like this, but found nothing. Frowning, she turned her thoughts to the other adepts. What had Felix, Jenna, Piers and Gareth done when they found out that their companions has mysteriously vanished? Had they panicked, or did they instead concentrate on figuring out what had happened? Or both? How long had they been gone, anyway? In a place like this, it was easy to lose track of time. Mia couldn't be sure whether she had been here an hour or a day-- or longer. She fought back a shudder at that thought.

"I have a theory." Ivan's quiet, thoughtful voice brought her attention back to her companions, and she raised her head to listen.

"Yeah?" Sheba inquired. "Let's hear it, then."

"I was thinking... What if we're not on Weyard at all?" He began, looking not at them but at the western horizon, which grew brighter by the moment.

"What? That's impossible!" She shook her head, staring at him incredulously. "You can't be serious. Even our best astronomers agree that Weyard is the only habitable world in existence."

"No, that's not what I mean." Ivan smiled slightly, tapping the tip of his staff softly with one finger. "I mean... What if this place only exists in someone's mind? If we had been

teleported here, we would have been able to tell-- after all, we can sense psynergy use pretty well. And as far as I know, there's no other way to instantly travel from one place to another. So I was thinking, what if this place isn't really *real* at all? When Sheba and I read Isaac's mind, we couldn't get a reading, but instead felt as if we were being burned from the inside out. Obviously something went wrong, and we all agree that something isn't quite right with Isaac at the moment." Here he paused, glancing at Sheba to see if she followed his explanation.

She paled. "You can't mean..."

He nodded. "I think that somehow, it went wrong enough that we were actually sucked into a place inside his mind-- whether we're inside his mind itself, or in a place he dreamed, or a place he made up... That's the only thing I can think of. As far as I know, something like this has never happened before, but that doesn't mean it's not possible."

"You mean we're... We're in a place that doesn't actually exist?" Mia turned her head to stare at him, not sure she believed any of this.

"Yes. Well, no... Sort of. It does *exist*, but not in a material sense. Any Jupiter adept knows that to think something is to create something, even if it created only within the boundaries of one's mind. If Isaac has ever thought of or dreamed about a place like this, then he created it, whether he was aware of it or not. So it's real, but has no material manifestation."

"So it's real, but not." Mia shook her head. "That's... That can't be. It's *impossible*. I can see, I can feel, I can speak, so how is it that I'm in a made-up place? If this place isn't real, then my body can't be real, and therefore I'm not really

here, only my mind is and I just think I'm here..." She trailed off. "That's just not possible, Ivan. It goes against all logic."

"Mind over matter," Sheba said with a small smile. "Never underestimate the mind's ability to create something and make you believe that it's really happening. Many shamans in Gondwan and Hesperia believe that true enlightenment can be found through meditation and overcoming material needs and desires. A historic shaman from Hesperia was even said to have lived for twenty years without eating, just by overcoming his physical body's desires and living in an enlightened state. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know that the mind is more powerful than many give it credit for."

Mia was silent for a moment. "Maybe you're right... But still... It's just hard to get my head around the idea. If we *are* somewhere in Isaac's mind, then how on Weyard do we get *out*?"

"That's the problem." Ivan sighed. "I don't know. Like I said, I don't think anything like this has ever happened before, so I'm not sure how it works, or if we even can get out."

"Wow, that makes us feel a *lot* better," Sheba commented dryly. "We've actually done something no one else has ever done before, only we might not live to tell the tale. Great."

"Well, I also said that just because something's never been done before doesn't mean it's not possible. That also applies to getting out of here and back to Weyard."

"Yeah," She agreed. "We can always hope that--"

"Umm... There's something else we might have to live through first," Mia interrupted, getting to her feet and pointing at the horizon. "Look."

Ivan and Sheba complied, their eyes widening as they did so. As a bright crimson orb rose into sight on the western horizon, the eastern side also brightened, but what they saw there wasn't remotely comforting, as the thought of daylight might have been. There, where stone met sky, a black mass was forming, expanding and spilling over onto the northern and southern sides of their small made-up world. As the stampede of darkness grew closer to the trio, they could see that it was composed of monsters-- black, multiple-armed things, with yellow eyes and way too many teeth.

Ivan and Sheba scrambled to their feet, and did the only thing they could think of. They ran.

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***Chapter 5*: Consensio: Harmony**

Apply standard disclaimers here.

----- DEUS EX MACHINA (by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya) ((Written: 6/22/06 Published: 2/09/07)) -----

Chapter Five: Demons (*Angels*)

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Alex ran a hand through his hair, which was frozen to his head, coated with snow. He smiled. Isaac was falling. Isaac was dying. That was good. He knew it was good; after all, how could it not be good? His enemy... His hated, despised enemy... Was dying. Alone, in the cold. And Alex-- the invincible, the immortal Alex-- had escaped his fate. He was not going to die, and that was all that mattered. After Isaac fell, he was sure that his half of the Golden Sun's power would be released from his body, and then he could claim it. No one could survive the fall from Mercury Lighthouse, could they?

The ring of steel on stone brought him back to his current situation: Felix and Jenna. They had to be dealt with, he supposed; he couldn't just leave them here where they could easily cause trouble for him. Yes, Felix had once been something akin to a friend, but all things had to end...

He turned to face the siblings, who were staring at him numbly, their weapons lying useless on the floor of the aerie. Jenna's tears had frozen to her face, and snow was building in her hair, making her look much older than she really was. The things the cold did to people... The things people did to people... Cold people, frozen people. People

like him. He would just not think about it, that was all. He would just get it over with; no need for thoughts or feelings. No need for anything but power and life. No need. Of course...

Alex lifted his sword in his left hand, shaking the snow from its blade with one deft movement. Felix looked startled by the motion, but as the Mercury adept stepped forward, he simply lowered his head. He had nothing to live for, Alex supposed, now that his friends and most of his family were dead. Was that the way people really thought? Was there actually a single person in existence who would forfeit their life for no reason? Suddenly, he was inexplicably, uncontrollably, angry. How could Felix just give up what he had fought so hard for? He had dedicated his entire life to just that-- life-- partially because it had nearly been taken from him not so long ago. How could anyone surrender their own life?

Despite all evidence to the contrary, life was very precious to him. How else could he have left his hometown on a desperate search for a cure, for power, for the things that man had only dreamed of since the dawn of time? Why else would he have done anything and everything in his power to bring his goals to fruition? Now, it infuriated him that Felix-- the Felix he had traveled with, fought with, nearly died with-- could give up. The idea disgusted him, enraged him, and in a small part of his mind, saddened him.

Alex took another step towards the two adepts, an almost inhuman snarl escaping his lips. Very well, then... If Felix and Jenna were able to give up the only thing that mattered, then give it up they would. Alex himself would take it, would add their lives to his own, would tear them apart and rip and kill until nothing mattered anymore but blood and snow. With the blade he held in his hand, with the power coursing

through his veins, with the cold on his side, he would finally make it end. He would kill to find closure. He would kill to make it right.

He stepped forward again, battered by the wind but no longer able to feel the malevolence of the storm. Everything that mattered was on his side. He hesitated once-- only once, and only for a moment-- and brought his blade up, then down, then back. He would just not look, that was all. He would just not see, and then it wouldn't matter. He had never possessed anything like a friend, so why should it matter?

Hearing her brother fall but, like Alex, choosing not to look, Jenna heaved a small sob and sank to her knees. Blood swirled with snow around her feet and legs, and he had to make himself not hesitate again. This time his sword hissed as it flew through the air, then there was a sound he could not describe, and then somehow there was silence.

He looked up at the northern sky in wonder, extended his palms to feel the caress of the frigid air. The incessant howling of the wind had ceased as abruptly as Jenna's life had ended, leaving in its wake a small scattering of tiny snowflakes. It would be okay, then.

He pulled his sword free with one short tug, still averting his gaze from the bodies. The sound of metal on metal as he sheathed it seemed horribly loud in the midst of such silence, and instinctively he flinched, as if nature would raise her hand to punish him for such noise. He made himself smile, and turn away, and suddenly he was flying.

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Felix sat up so quickly that his back and shoulders cried out in protest, his hands tightening their grip around his sheets

as if they could anchor him in the here and now, away from the dream. He was not afraid, of course; why should he be? Nightmares were something that only children feared, that adults had the capacity to laugh at and forget. He had no right to be afraid-- especially not of a man who had once been his traveling companion.

For the first time since the lighting, he wondered what had become of Alex. He had never been quite clear on why exactly he wanted the lighthouses to be lit, and somehow Felix couldn't bring himself to believe his story of wanting to see the beauty of a new age. Alex, he had learned, was the kind of man who thought of himself first and foremost. If he had wanted to see the lighthouses lit, then there was a good chance that there was something in it for him. However, Felix could not quite puzzle out what that something might have been. None of the adepts had seen Alex since the lighting, so it was hard to say what had become of him.

Sighing into the still air of the Vault inn, Felix stretched, blinking around at the near-blackness that surrounded him. He was confused for a moment, but then remembered the rain, pounding fast and hard against the shingled roof. The shutters were still closed tightly against it, but the fury of the storm was such that small streams of water had begun to sink in through the cracks between the shutters and the walls, making their way towards the floor. He smiled, mind still fuzzy from sleep. He loved the rain...

Then he stood so abruptly that he nearly fell back onto his bed again, steadying himself with one hand and massaging his temples with the other. It couldn't be night yet, if there was still dim light filtering into the room through the shutters. And no one else was sleeping either... Had he fainted? He tried to revisit the past few hours, but his head, still heavy with sleep, denied him access to the memories.

The last thing he could remember clearly was wishing Mia, Ivan, and Sheba good luck as they went to use mind read on a sleeping Isaac. Then... Nothing. Had he fainted right after that? And if so, why? He was fairly sure that he had never fainted in his entire life.

Shaking his head slowly, trying to push away a developing headache, he made his way across the room, easing the door open. The hallway was dark, but towards the stairs he could see a faint light. He stood there for a moment, listening for the voices of his friends, but his ears failed him and he was surrounded by only silence. Almost afraid of making too much noise, he crept towards the stairs, heading for the flickering light cast by lamps downstairs.

Once he came near enough, he noticed that it was, in fact, not completely silent-- his ears caught snippets of hushed conversation and the steady thrumming of water as it threw itself across the walls and ceiling. Piers and Gareth were seated at a table in the corner, picking at the remains of what appeared to be a late lunch. Refugees from Vale were scattered throughout the room, talking softly and also finishing up their meals. The innkeeper's wife was washing dishes, but the innkeeper himself was nowhere to be seen.

Piers looked up as Felix descended the stairs, and waved him over to the table, where he quietly drew out a chair and seated himself. He shifted uncomfortably, noticing that Gareth was eyeing him strangely. Silence reigned for a few moments until he managed to gather his thoughts and put them into words. "Where's... Everyone else? Is Isaac awake yet?"

Piers and Gareth exchanged glances, and it was the Lemurian who gave a reply. "...No, he's not awake yet. And we have a bit of a problem."

"A problem?" Felix frowned.

"Yes... It appears that Sheba and Ivan failed in their attempt to help Isaac, and something they did must have backfired, because we found them unconscious a few hours ago. We tried everything we could, but they just... Won't wake up." He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, golden eyes troubled.

"Won't wake up?" Felix repeated numbly, the words seeming to echo back at him, rebounding across the torches and tables and walls to return to his ears. Despite the number of refugees present in the room, it was eerily quiet. They talked amongst themselves, but their tones were dampened and rushed, as if they had much to say but were somehow afraid of being too loud in the telling. The general atmosphere was tense, like a bowstring that had been pulled taut and stood poised for release. "How... What happened?"

"We don't know," Piers admitted, his eyes scanning the Valeans nearby as if afraid they might be eavesdropping. Such fears were misplaced, however; no one seemed to be paying any attention to what went on around them, having ears and eyes for only their own conversations. "They were gone for a while, so we decided to go up and check on them, but... They were all asleep."

"Then you got kind of funny," Garet cut in, the lines on his brow a testament to the seriousness of the situation. "You said you were really tired, and had to have a nap... You just stumbled into another room and fell asleep. We left Jenna to keep watch on the others."

His eyes searched Felix's, as if asking for an explanation, but the brown-haired adept shook his head. "The last thing I

remember is wishing Ivan, Sheba, and Mia good luck. Everything after that is fuzzy."

Piers sighed heavily, leaning his elbows on the table and glaring at the ceiling. "I wish I knew what was going on," He said softly, and his companions silently agreed. "It seems like ever since the lighthouses were lit..." He trailed off, uncertain at how to explain himself. "Everything changed," He finished lamely.

"Well, everything *was* supposed to change," Felix countered. "The New Age, the Golden Sun... Surely nothing can remain the same after that."

Piers granted him a weak smile. "I suppose you're right. Maybe I was just expecting more... Or less."

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Ivan, Mia, and Sheba ran as fast as possible, booted feet scrambling over rock that was smooth almost to a polish, their cloaks streaming out behind them.

"What... Are those things?" Ivan panted, glancing behind him as he ran. The cloud of black creatures on the horizon was drawing steadily closer, despite their fleeing prey, teeth gnashing and eyes glowing with intentions that could only be malevolent.

"I don't... Know." Mia gasped out a reply, not daring to look behind her, terror drumming a beat inside her ribcage. "I think... I might... Rather *not* know."

Sheba nodded mute agreement beside her. "Should we try... Teleporting?" She inquired breathlessly, glancing sidelong at her companions.

"No!" Mia protested, fear giving her enough breath to form the word. "For all... We know... This world isn't... Even real! We might end up... Somewhere... Even stranger!"

"Let's not risk it," Ivan agreed. "I don't enjoy... The idea of what... Might happen if... We tried it."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Mia felt herself trip up, her boot caught on a bit of loose rock. Terror welled up within her, its drumbeat even stronger, as she tumbled onto the mostly smooth ground. A moan escaped her lips as she fell, her head and spine making contact with the cool surface. Stars exploded in front of her eyes, pain making itself known in the throbbing areas of her back and skull.

"Go!" She felt her lips form the sound, intending to encourage Ivan and Sheba to go on without her, but it died before it could even reach her vocal cords. Though it was difficult to see through the explosions her eyes entertained after her fall, she sensed a... Wrongness, a difference in this strange reality. No longer could she hear the horde of creatures pounding across the stone, gaining on their victims, demonic tongues lolling in many-toothed mouths. No longer could she see only the crimson of the skies and the grey shale of the earth. Somewhere, a different shade was seeping in... Blue? She took comfort in this familiar color, and grasped this new thing as if it were tangible, gathering the strength to blink back her eye's delusions and see properly.

Indeed, the sky was now a sweet-looking baby blue, rather than the crimson it had been moments before. It was not precisely the color of the real sky, but it was close-- only a few shades darker and slightly off in exact hue. This cheered her greatly, enough so that she could push aside her fear of

being torn limb from limb and sit up, ignoring her bruises from the fall.

The monsters were gone. She blinked in confusion, scanning the horizon from east to west. Yes... They were gone! Ivan and Sheba stood on either side of her, their faces etched with disbelief, their jaws slack. She followed their gaze and saw what she had missed in her relief: a tall figure, clad in black, a wicked-looking blade raised above his-- or her-- head. They stood with their back to the adepts, and it was immediately clear to Mia that this person was responsible for the absence of the black monsters that had been there seconds earlier.

As if feeling their stares, the figure turned, revealing herself to be a woman. Her face was young, but rather severe-looking, like a schoolteacher who had had her fill of unruly students. Upon closer inspection, Mia found that she was not precisely *tall* at all. The illusion was in how she held herself; haughty and commanding, like someone who was not used to being denied.

"Why, hello, young adepts." She broke the silence, and Mia had to resist the urge to cover her ears. Her voice-- her words-- everything *about* her-- reeked of power, and destruction, and manipulation. She was reminded unpleasantly of Alex, and had to force herself to remember that Alex hadn't really been quite like *this*. "I have longed for the pleasure of meeting you-- Ivan, Sheba, Mia. Alas, fate denied me that chance until now." Her features twisted horribly into something that must have been a smile, but looked more like the bearing of fangs. "Tell me, how on Weyard did you get to this place?"

There was a long silence, into which the strange woman continued to smile, and the adepts continued to look

flabbergasted.

"Uh... Who are you?" Ivan managed at last, adjusting his grip on his staff in preparation for this possible threat.

The woman seemed to look thoughtful at this. "I have been known by many names throughout the ages, though many of them were given by my *dear* older brother and therefore somewhat less than pleasant." She bared her fangs again, as if inviting them to share the joke, but none of them managed even a tremulous smile. "More recently, I have also been known by many names, the most common of which might be Adoramuste. The Adored." She laughed lightly, but a coldness seeped into her voice, and the sound was not heartening, but unnerving.

"I see." Sheba was the next to speak. She studied the woman with a look of mistrust bordering on open dislike. She, too, gripped her staff rather more tightly than was necessary. "How did you get here?"

"I go where I wish." The answer was quick, even defensive; Adoramuste waved a hand as if to dismiss the question. "I could ask you the same, Jupiter adept. How is it that you are able to do what few others-- even I-- have ever accomplished, and step within the confines of the mind of another?"

"I don't know," Sheba answered cautiously, but honestly. "I was trying a simple mind read, and somehow got sucked into... This." She gestured towards their general surroundings. "I don't know how it happened. I wish it hadn't."

Adoramuste truly laughed then, her voice deep and frosty. "Ah, young adepts! Such power they have, and have yet to discover!"

Mia finally gathered the strength to stand, her bruises protesting. She wasn't at all sure she liked this woman. "How did you get rid of all those monsters?" She shot at Adoramuste, who was still looking amused and somewhat pleased with herself.

"I unmade them," She replied, her tone suggesting that this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Not so easy for some, perhaps, but for me--" She bared her teeth again, which glinted pearly white-- "It was a simple matter."

Mia stared at her in open disbelief. "That's impossible," She stated flatly. "Some can master banishing, which sends things from one place to another-- is that what you mean?"

"No, no, child, not at all. I *unmade* them. They're gone from the spectrum of existence, whether real or imagined. Surely, new ones could be made by those skilled in the art of making, but these particular *Evertos* are gone forever. Truly, I am a master of my craft."

"Evertos?" Ivan asked, his confusion evident at the new term.

"Mind demons," Adoramuste explained. "They feed on the soul, particularly on its negative feelings, while at the same time augmenting magic. They are a useful tool, really, and your friend Isaac has a good many of them."

"Mind demons?!" Mia exclaimed, narrowing her eyes at the older woman. "Who are you, really? How do you know so much?"

Adoramuste gave her a searching look, her dark eyes frosty. "Wisdom comes of age, young lady," She said off-handedly. "And I am much older than I look."

Ivan, Mia, and Sheba exchanged uneasy glances. In many ways, Mia would have preferred those so-called mind demons to this woman, who was cold and aloof-- and who stunk of danger.

"Look, do you know how we can get back to Vault?" Sheba asked, her eyes glaring defiance at the woman. "Right now, I just want to get back before Felix and everyone else starts to worry."

Were the situation less severe, Mia might have teased, "*Felix* and the others?" just for the pleasure of seeing the younger girl go red. Instead, she merely listened as Adoramuste began to speak.

"I could send you back, I suppose," She said slowly, as if choosing her words carefully. "Indeed, that would probably be best..." She stroked the pommel of her wicked-looking sword with a thoughtful finger, then continued, "But I would suggest not using Mind Read on poor young Isaac for a while yet. One unpleasant side effect of the Evertos is that such things often backfire-- with less than desirable results, as I'm sure you have learned."

"How do we get rid of the Evertos?" Mia interrupted, her heart racing. This time her fear was not for herself but for Isaac, her friend, who was, despite her own assurances, definitely *not* okay.

Adoramuste gave another one of her frosty smiles and it was a moment before she replied, "*You* can't. *I* could, if I so chose, but I don't. Perhaps another Great One could also remove them. Surely, Isaac himself could if he were stronger, but he is not. His mind has suffered much in the turning of the past few years, and it will be many more years before he

is again up to his normal strength. Until them, I'm afraid, nothing can be done."

"But why don't you get rid of them, then?" Mia demanded, desperate in her helplessness.

"Alas, that would be counterproductive, in light of my current plans, young adept. If Isaac cannot free himself, I will not do it for him."

"Please?" She was aware that she was fighting a losing-- and possibly dangerous-- battle, but still she persisted. If indeed what the woman said was true, then she could not leave Isaac to suffer. She had to do *something*.

"No, Mia." Adoramuste's tone was final, her tightening grip on that curved blade an unannounced threat as to what might happen if she continued in her questioning. "Now, I think, it is time for you to return... Fight well and bravely, but remember how to recognize defeat..."

These last cryptic words ringing in her ears, Mia felt something jerk in the confines of her skull, and a brief lack of air. Then she was falling again, and this time her body hit wood, something soft and squishy breaking the fall where her head should have landed. Abruptly, she awoke, blinking her eyes against the darkness of Vault's inn, her head resting quite comfortably on Isaac's stomach.

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"So Osenia and Indra have formed an alliance of sorts?" Felix asked, seeking clarification of one of the many points in the discussion of politics he was carrying on with Piers. Uninterested in most political maneuverings, Gareth contributed little, though he did listen attentively, perhaps aware of the way the world was slowly beginning to reshape.

"Yes," Piers replied, his frown nearly lost in the dim light-- many of the torches had been extinguished after lunchtime so as not to waste fuel, and the afternoon was sliding slowly into evening, though the sky remained as cloudy as ever. "Though some would suggest they are not so much allies as sisters-- it is an idea that they may merge into an entirely new country soon. But, for now, it remains an alliance. As both countries have adequate ports and roaring trade, they make an impressive allied force. Even if they do not declare war on Angara, as rumor insists they will, they can use their economic and naval power to one-up other countries and continents."

"One-up?" Felix queried, one brow raised. Indra and Osenia had seemed peaceful enough when he had visited. It was not as if either had a long-standing grudge towards Angara or other reason for resorting to war-mongering; or at least, not that he knew.

"Well, their naval power far outnumbers that of any other nation. So they could, say, block Atteka's ports until Atteka made some concession, like taxless trade, or more trading materials, that kind of thing. It could also be used to intimidate others into allying with them, lest they be invaded or lest Indra and Osenia cut off trade with them. And, if they *do* declare war on Angara, they're at an advantage because their naval power far exceeds Angara's; not to mention that they frequently trade with each other, and Angara would be greatly weakened by the loss of that trade."

Felix shook his head. "But why would they *want* to declare war? That's what I don't understand. As far as I knew, the relationships between Indra, Osenia, and Angara were rather peaceful before the lighting."

"Land, power..." Piers gave a strained smile and sipped at his tea. "I don't know for sure, but people have a habit of going to war for rather silly reasons."

The Venus adept nodded his agreement, opening his mouth to ask another question, but the words had barely begun to take shape in his head when he was interrupted by Jenna, who arrived at their table as if borne by a whirlwind. She was breathing heavily, her hair disheveled, strands of it hanging in her face.

"I think they're waking up!" She exclaimed, worry evident in her eyes. "Mia was mumbling something in her sleep, and then Ivan and Sheba started to stir... Come on, let's go!" She tugged at her brother's sleeve, poorly concealing her impatience.

Not needing to be told twice, the adepts abandoned their seats and hurried up the stairs, ignoring the politely baffled looks the inn's tenants cast in their direction. Felix found himself in the lead, anxiety coloring his thoughts despite his best efforts to shove it aside. He was a firm believer in doing rather than worrying; worrying seemed like a hopeless waste of time to him. If something could be done, then he'd do it; if nothing could be done, then he was content to either wait or think it out. He was not, however, the kind of person who would just sit and wring his hands and moan, even when things seemed hopeless.

And now his worries refused to be banished, though he gritted his teeth with the effort of forcing them back. Sheba would be *fine*, it wasn't like she was in mortal danger or anything... No use dwelling on it, anyway... She'd be *fine*...

But these thoughts didn't stop him from feeling relief so intense it was nearly dizzying when he saw her sitting up,

rubbing sleep from her eyes. Next to her, Ivan was also stirring, greeting his friends with a wide yawn. On Sheba's other side, Mia was sitting very straight and staring oddly at Isaac's stomach. Even in the dim light, he could tell that her countenance was shaded with a brilliant crimson. He had no time to wonder why, however, for at that moment Isaac opened his eyes, and immediately every face in the room turned towards his.

He blinked, propping himself up with one hand and looking carefully around at the adepts assembled around him. A crease developed between his eyes as he opened his mouth, shook his head, opened his mouth again, and finally forced out a few words.

"What's... Going on?"

Felix and Piers exchanged glances, then looked towards Mia, Ivan, and Sheba for an answer. Sheba mutely shook her head, Ivan frowned, and eventually it was Mia who spoke first.

"Well, I see we'll have a lot to discuss," she said briskly, her words coming out in a rush as if she were trying to get them out and over with as fast as possible. "But why don't you start first, Isaac? It all started with you, you know. You've been acting... Strangely." She cast her eyes downwards at this admission, and in the flickering light created by the torches in the hallway, her expression was unreadable.

Isaac shook his head, looking uncomfortable. "But I don't know what's happening," he protested. "I've just been a little overtired, that's all. It's only been a few days since the lighting was completed, after all..."

"Okay, I can see you don't want to talk," Mia snapped, standing up abruptly. Then, perhaps realizing how severe

her tone had been, she sighed softly. "I'm sorry. Let's just... Go and have dinner, okay? We can discuss it afterwards, when we'll all feel better..."

Ivan followed Mia's example and stood, stretching his hands over his head. "I second the motion," he said, grinning, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm *starving*."

"Yeah, me too," Isaac admitted.

Garet and Jenna, beaming despite the grim mood that had gripped the room moments before, led the way down the stairs. In a way, the newly arisen political situation with Osenia and Indra was an advantage; now all the villagers would be too involved in their own conversations to try to eavesdrop on the adepts, a problem they'd had for the first few days in Vault. Now, however, the novelty of the eight youths who had almost singlehandedly saved the world seemed to be wearing off; more of the refugees, at least, were content to leave them alone.

Felix, for one, had not been asked for an autograph at all that day, and this alone was enough to lift his spirits. He was not the kind of person who reveled in fame. Instead, he was content to sit back and let Isaac take most of the credit. He had never really thought himself a fit hero; Isaac, with his flyaway hair, piercing blue eyes, and quiet demeanor looked far more like a hero than Felix ever would, and that suited both of them perfectly well. Felix had never been able to lead quite like Isaac had, and he was almost glad to be free of that burden. Let the whole world think that Isaac was the only hero...

As they were sitting down for dinner, two long tables having been pushed together to admit their full group, Sheba

caught his eyes and smiled. Yes, he thought, he was perfectly happy with the way things were...

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Meanwhile, miles away from the cozy little town of Vault, two wind-battered and rain-slicked figures trudged through the mud, supporting a third figure between them. The first figure, a woman who looked petite next to her companions but who was actually quite tall for a woman, was huddled against the rain, shivering uncontrollably. Her long blonde hair was made drab and dark by the mud that was streaked through it, and her clothes were even worse off. She was muttering irritably at her two companions, though the third figure was unconscious.

The second figure was a man, tall and well-built, with hair that might have been naturally dark but that the rain, mud, and approaching nightfall made unclear. He bore the woman's complaints in silence, though a muscle occasionally twitched in his jaw. He supported the weight of the third figure without apparent effort, though his progress was hindered by large feathery structures that kept batting him on the back of the head.

The third figure, for his part, looked very still and pale; he seemed almost dead until one got close enough to feel his body heat. The feathery structures were his wings, once white and beautiful, now drab and muddy like the rest of him. Even through his decrepit state and unconsciousness, there was something desperate that hung about his features; a hungry, searching kind of look that was both horrifying and piteous. One might have sworn that he was *willing* himself into wakefulness and failing.

As the sun set (this was characterized by a gradual darkening of the sky, for the clouds had not come anywhere close to dispersing and the sun remained hidden), the figures trudged onward, dirty and wet and freezing and altogether miserable. They made for the town of Vault, where curling towers of smoke battled against the rain for their right to mingle with the clouds.

Somewhere far away, the Wise One was laughing.

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A/N: hate myself for coming up with something as infintely creative and imaginitive as *mind demons*. Well, I guess it's not as bad as the Black Monster, which is an actual monster in Legend of Dragoon. Real creative.

Constructive criticism and any other type of criticism or any comments you may have are all very welcome. I'd especially like opinions on how my characterization is going so far. I can never tell for sure in my own writing.

***Chapter 6*: Epiphany**

A/N: It's not dead! Heh. I'll be surprised yet again if people are still reading this. I haven't updated in forever but I don't think this story will be abandoned since I love it too much; updates will just be *very* few and far between. I recently made a cross-country move and I'm getting ready to make *another* one in a few weeks, so life has been pretty hectic.

To everyone who has stuck with the story this far: I love you, and enjoy. :p

Apply standard disclaimers here.

----- DEUS EX MACHINA (by Raven Minamino a.k.a. Kuroya) ((Written: 2/09/07 Published: 1/02/08)) -----

Chapter Six: Epiphany

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Adoramuste sat with her long legs propped up on her desk, reclining in the comfortable squishy chair the Osenians had provided her with. Here in Alhafra, she was both a scientist and strategist, deeply concerned for the fate of Weyard after the lighting. She had played her part well: indignant that the Angarans were closed-minded enough to keep the ruins of their Sol Sanctum from scientists like herself, who had every right to study alchemy there. She dropped a word here and there to receptive ears that not only was Angara determined to keep its secrets (the way only a barbaric and nationalistic society would), but it desired the secrets of Indra and Osenia as well. The Shrine of the Sea God, Air's Rock; she had convinced those in power that Angaran scientists were deeply interested in these as well.

Mt. Aleph, of course, was a subject of international importance after the rise of the Golden Sun, and humanity as a whole would benefit from its study. Air's Rock and The Shrine of the Sea God were ancient and deeply religious places whose secrets were already known. With her great command of language, she convinced all those that mattered that Angara's position on the matter was absurd and selfish. Gradually, she even managed to sway those who had long been Angara's allies. The country's refusal to let the most important landmark of the time be studied was not only shortsighted, she argued, but an outright act of shunning and slighting its neighbors.

It helped that much of her work had been done for her when she arrived; many of the nation's top scientists were in an uproar, finding that they were not even allowed to catch a glimpse of Mt. Aleph's ruins. The Valean elders had declared that it was a sacred place, meant only for those with Psynesergetic blood. They insisted that the Wise One had told the Elder personally that no one but those of Vale were to study or dwell in the ruins. No one from out of Angara was permitted to so much as lift a stone, while those from the neighboring towns helped excavate Vale. The capital city of Tolbi insisted that there was nothing they could do. The Valean's beliefs were honored by their government.

Normally, the countries might have been able to negotiate a compromise, therefore avoiding the spread of discontent--and rumors that Angara was at odds with the rest of the world, ready to fight for its beliefs at the slightest provocation.

But Adoramuste knew, better than most, and perhaps even better than any, how much one woman could do. She had put herself in a position of power and repute, said just the right things, humbled at the right moments, and made

herself seen and heard by those that mattered. Soon Alhafra had invited her to stay at their research institute, and here she had continued to climb the political ladder, letting slip that she was considered a great strategist in her home country (though she never mentioned a name).

If all went well, and she had no doubts that it would, Osenia and Indra would solidify their alliance the next day, and soon after, both would be ready for war.

She smiled at this thought, inspecting her overly long nails in the light from the fireplace. As a person of great importance, she had earned the right to a lavish guest room complete with its own adjoining study, which she had humbly accepted with a great show of thanks. She was very careful to seem like nothing but a peaceful scientist, who would have delighted in negotiations if they were at all possible.

Humans, she thought viciously, are so easy to manipulate when confronted with anything new. They swarm around their leaders like dogs to a man, sniffing about stupidly and asking where they should go, what they should do.

And she, of course, had no qualms about being the leader, the huntress. With Osenia and Indra joined as one, she could easily lead them into battle and strike down Angara, taking control of Vale and the ruins. From there, she would grow stronger, build her army, and eventually take down her brother.

These thoughts were interrupted by a knocking at the door; hastily, Adoramuste slid her legs back beneath the desk, returning her attention to the stacks of papers, quills, inkwells, and thick books that lay strewn across it.

"Come in," She called courteously, a smile coloring features that had a moment ago been filled with hatred.

A short, portly man stepped into the room, clad in a servant's robe. He bowed respectfully, polite but not groveling. "The mayor and his advisors wish to see you, lady."

"Of course." She stood at once, shuffling the stacks of papers on her desk into some semblance of order. "Tell him, if you please, that I will be there within ten minutes. I have some papers to finish." This was not completely true, but she had learned early on that it was best to make people wait; not too long, but just long enough to appreciate how very *busy* she was with matters of great importance.

"Very well. I will relay the message." The servant hurried off, effacing himself so effectively that she barely even noticed him leaving. Slowly, she let her polite smile slide off her features and glared into the fire. Of course, it all came back to *him*. That liar, that traitor, that-- that *murderer*. He had *no* right to mess with *her* creations. She would show him, of course, who the real leader was. What powers she did not yet have, she would take, by force if necessary. What knowledge she did not yet have, she would gain-- eventually. Pride and indignation returned to her some of the strength that she had lost when she had been sealed away (for so long, so *long*).

She knew, of course, which pawns she would need to use, which people she would need to manipulate, to make this all possible. It helped that though her brother was in many ways her equal, he often failed to give her credit where credit was due, and this had turned out to be a dangerous flaw in the past. Perhaps she could again exploit this weakness...

These and many other things fluttering about her mind like mosquitoes eager for blood, she left her study, prepared to meet with the mayor of Alhafa. Truly, the time had come for her to reign as she had in times past-- as Fate herself had intended.

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"This is crazy," Jenna said flatly with a shake of her fiery hair. "I think you're just imaging things. I mean, come on, *mind demons*?"

"Evertos, they were called," Mia corrected absently, staring into her empty tea cup as if entranced. "And if I was imagining things, then I guess Sheba and Ivan were too."

Sheba nodded. "We *did* all see the same things. I suppose it's possible that it was all a figment of one of our imaginations, but... It seemed too *real*."

"And this woman, Adoramuste," Piers cut in, "None of you had seen her before?"

Slowly, Ivan, Mia, and Sheba all shook their heads, tossing sidelong glances at each other for confirmation.

"Well, it's certainly beyond my ability to explain," The Lemurian continued after a brief pause, "So I think we will have to trust you for now. What did Adoramuste say about the Evertos? Did she mention any way of getting rid of them?"

"Not in so many words," Mia replied. "She said that she could have removed them, or another 'Great One'-- whatever she meant by that-- could have, or Isaac himself could have if his mind hadn't been so damaged. But she didn't say *how* it could be done."

"Hmm. I see."

Several moments passed in silence, all of the adepts seemingly absorbed in their tea cups and empty dinner plates. The inn was mostly empty now, many of its guests having retired to their rooms. Dinner had been a large and lively affair, gossip flowing like wildfire now that the news of Osenia and Indra had spread. It seemed that everyone had an opinion or hypothesis on how this new situation would be resolved, and everyone had wanted to voice their own thoughts. Dinner usually lasted no longer than forty-five minutes, but tonight the eating, drinking, and conversation had continued long into the hours of the evening. Most were worried and distraught at the news, but that did nothing to dim the aura of excitement that had permeated the villagers.

Felix felt the lines of a frown beginning to form in his brow, but ignored the feeling, concentrating instead of the even more interesting news of what had happened to Ivan, Mia, and Sheba. Unfortunately, he felt, Isaac had contributed little, rarely speaking more than a few words at a time. He had seemed even more introverted than usual, avoiding everyone's gazes and making monosyllabic replies whenever possible.

Mia, Felix thought, had seemed rather distraught at this, but voiced her concerns through body language rather than verbal accusations. He thought she was worried about him, and he couldn't blame her. Everyone was at least slightly anxious about Isaac now, with these new developments on top of his strange behavior lingering unspoken over the conversation.

Their uneasy silence slowly began to turn into drowsiness. The last few late-dining guests were polishing off their food

and drink and heading upstairs, while the innkeeper and his wife quietly cleaned up after them. Many of the torches were extinguished, leaving their large group in semi darkness. Felix found himself nearly drowsing off despite himself (it had been a very long day, after all), when he and his companions were startled by a loud knocking at the door.

The innkeeper's wife let out a surprised squeal and dropped the dinner plate she had been holding, which shattered into pieces across the floor. The innkeeper swore softly and crossed the room in several strides to wrench the door open, perhaps expecting some late guest. What he saw, however, left him dumbstruck, moving his mouth open and closed without forming any sound. His face grew steadily paler, even in the dim light, and he let his arms fall to his sides, shaking slightly.

Felix himself was convinced for a few moments that he had indeed dozed off, and was dreaming these visitors. He firmly believed that once dead, people did not come back to life. It was this philosophy, along with his theory that worrying was useless, that had helped him move on after the deaths of his parents. Therefore, he did not feel shock or disbelief as he otherwise might have, but a calm sort of acceptance that these kinds of dreams were inevitable.

His reaction was apparently not shared by the rest of the adepts, though. Jenna was staring at the three figures, mouth open and eyes slightly unfocused. Mia was making noises in her throat like an angry cat, her fingernails gripping the edge of the table until they began to dig into the wood. Isaac had stood the instant the knocking had sounded, and was now standing with one hand on the hilt of his sword (a replacement that one of the visitors from Kalay had lent him), a serene expression across his features. Garet stood next to Isaac, glancing between him and the visitors,

looking awestruck. The other adepts showed similar reactions, but no one moved or spoke for several very long moments.

It was in those moments that Felix finally realized that he was not dreaming. This situation was glaringly lacking in that familiar soft quality that dreams often bore. Not to mention it was so desperately *unlikely* that he doubted even his creative subconscious could dream it up. He dreamed about Saturos, Menardi, and Alex, yes, but never like *this*. Not even close.

This realization caused him to start out his chair, this starting a chain reaction among his companions. Mia and Piers rose at the same time, closely followed by Sheba, Ivan, and Jenna. Still, it was the innkeeper who first broke the silence.

"Who the bloody *hell* are you?!" He demanded, raising his fists at the visitors. Felix could hardly blame him, as they made quite a picture: three rain- and mud-beaten people (though even such a general term as *person* seemed almost unfitting in the state they were in), clothes torn and hair disheveled. The third visitor, though, was enough to make the other two seem positively normal. He was halfway slumped over on the floor, held up only by one of the other visitors, who was gripping his wrist to keep him from collapsing. Attached to his back were strange mud-splattered structures, which undeniably resembled *wings*. They seemed to be scrunched up to less than half of their full length at the moment, but his companions seemed to be having some trouble dragging him through the doorway nonetheless.

The conscious man, looking irritated and bad-tempered through the mud that covered half his face, shoved the

innkeeper aside so hard that he fell back against the door, spluttering indignantly but too afraid to attempt to get back up. He glared around the room, his gaze finding Felix's and boring into him.

Instantly, as if the man's eyes had compelled him into motion, the Venus adept strode across the room, the sound of his boots on the wooden floor eerily loud in the silence. The innkeeper's wife whimpered as he drew near, her eyes wide and fearful. He passed her without a second glance, stopping only when he stood directly in front of the man he now recognized as Saturos. He took in his decrepit appearance, heavy breathing, and clenched fists, and wordlessly extended his hand.

Saturos raised an incredulous brow, his stance conveying just a small amount of mocking. After a few seconds, however, he took his hand and shook it. It was cold and clammy, but his grip was tight and sure. Felix felt his lips twitch slightly in what might have become a smile if the circumstances hadn't been so severe.

Menardi looked him over as if he were the one who looked as if he'd just survived a typhoon, arching one brow in an expression that mirrored Saturos's. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked haughtily away, clearly not quite ready to be reunited with the man she had treated as part traveling companion, part servant in their journey together. Perhaps she still thought him as somewhat inferior. Perhaps she was simply angry that he had defied her atop Venus Lighthouse. There was no time to dwell on this, however; even as his thoughts raced, Felix felt his friends gathering behind him, Isaac and Gareth in the fore.

"What is the meaning of this?" As leader, it was Isaac who spoke first, and his voice was strained, echoing softly

throughout the large, near-empty room.

Saturos slowly shrugged, the gesture eloquent in its simplicity. "I assure you, we know as little as you do."

Felix had to keep himself from starting at the sound of his voice. It was raspy and dry, as if from disuse, and sounded little like the Saturos he had known for years. The shock of this, somehow, seemed even more startling than everything else, including their appearance and Alex's... Predicament. For the first time, he took a good look at the unconscious man, still held up by his companions. He looked pale and ill, his chest still from the absence of breath. Clearly, he was dead.

As he took this in, he felt his lungs constricting. Alex, dead? Now this was... This was... Different. Not right, somehow.

Moving slowly, as if any sudden movement might startle those around him into rash actions, he knelt in front of the Mercury adept, placing one hand over his free wrist and feeling for a pulse. There was none.

"What... Happened?" He managed to speak, though he felt that his words might never find the ears of those who would listen, swallowed instead by the walls that seemed to be closing in, drawing him into himself, closer and closer...

He shook himself to shake these strange feelings and to his surprise, it was Menardi who responded first, in the form of a brief shake of her head. "We found him," She said shortly, "In the ruins of what must be Mt. Aleph. He's... Not dead, as far as we can tell, but not alive either." Hastily, as if realizing she had nearly voiced concern, she looked away and thinned her lips. "Not that I care."

Saturos continued, "We... Came to... Buried in the ruins. I don't know how. We dug ourselves out, and he found us. He seemed delusional, spoke to us briefly, and then collapsed. We have no idea what happened." His gaze flickered among the adepts gathered before him, something in those stormy eyes challenging, as if daring one of them to disagree. "We had hoped a healer might help him."

Mia stepped forward to stand next to Isaac, her gaze fiercely impassive as she looked down at her former friend. "May I... See him?" She asked, her voice slightly tremulous. She looked up to Saturos for permission, which Menardi seemed to resent, as she looked away and gave what was unmistakably a derisive snort.

Saturos ignored her, however, and nodded at Mia, dragging Alex through the inn's doorway (turning him sideways so his wings would fit) and drawing the door closed behind him.

Mia took a few more small steps forward, kneeling next to Felix. He scooted to the side to give her some space, unpleasantly aware that he alone out of all of his friends had once allied himself with these people. Jenna, Sheba, and Kraden had been involved, yes, but they had been more prisoners than comrades. Felix had openly allied himself with Saturos, Menardi, and Alex, fighting alongside them and only defying them when it came to those people that mattered, like his family and Sheba. Even though these once villains were now seen as being in the right, he still couldn't help but feel that his friends now viewed him with hostility. His three years in Prox seemed sharper and clearer than ever, the gap between him and the others a burning fear in his chest.

He had done what was right, regardless of the sacrifices it entailed. Saturos and Menardi were martyrs-- or rather, they

had been, or might have been, martyrs-- in the eyes of many, but they remained villains in the eyes of others. He just hoped that his companions were not still among the others.

Now uncomfortable at his current position kneeling before the newcomers, he stood and turned to put his back against the wall (and the innkeeper, who was alternately cursing and praying under his breath), facing both Saturos and Menardi and the other adepts. Mia was frowning as she inspected Alex, running her hands over his arms, his chest, and, hesitantly, his wings.

"I think you're right," She announced at last. "He's not breathing, and his heart's not beating, but he seems not to be dead. His body is warm. It is... Preserved, somehow." She gestured towards his wings and again looked towards Saturos for confirmation. "You don't know... How *these* might have happened?"

The swordsman, who was now leaning against the door with a casual manner, as if the outcome of this encounter mattered little, raised a brow at her. "I've told you, have I not, that we know as little as you do?"

"Well, yes," She murmured, lowering her gaze. "I just hoped..." Distracted, her words trailed off, and she returned to her inspection of Alex, biting her lips as she continued to search for a pulse that refused to be found.

"Now wait a minute here!" Felix really did start as this voice made itself heard, frowning as his eyes found Gareth, who was standing with one hand on the hilt of his sword and an accusing finger pointed at Saturos. "This guy tried to kill us! He tried to kill lots of other people, too, when he was trying to light the lighthouses! Even if that was a good thing-- the

lighting, I mean-- he and Menardi still used the ends to justify the means! And we're going to-- to-- let them in this town, and help him and Alex, who might have tried to kill us too?" He stared around at his friends as if they had all gone insane. "How do we know they're not gonna go kill other people after we help them?"

Felix-- and many of the others, he noticed-- couldn't help but stare back at Garet. Partially they were slightly surprised at his small speech, and partially it seemed that his voice brought sanity back into their world, making them grasp the fact that yes, this was all really happening.

"He *has* a point, I suppose," Jenna said thoughtfully, frowning at Menardi. "You could've always just *told* Isaac and everyone why you were lighting the lighthouses, instead of trying to *kill* him. Could you blame him for thinking you were evil, after the way you acted?"

Menardi, taking offense at this, drew herself up to her full height and glared at her. "Like he would have believed us even if we tried to explain? You just contradicted yourself, girl. If he thought we were so evil, then why would he believe us if we told him why we were doing what we did? He would've thought it some excuse to stop him from following us and *getting in our way*." She said this last between gritted teeth, as if the memory of this still made her want to scream and throw things.

"But still!" Jenna threw up her hands in exasperation. "You could have made some *attempt*, you never know, you might have gotten through--"

"Don't speak about things you know nothing about!" Menardi hissed, her eyes now narrowed in barely concealed rage. "You saw what we did, the sacrifices we made, for Prox!

You don't know *anything* about what we went through! Don't even *suggest* that our deaths were in vain!"

Sensing that Menardi was nearing the edge of her rather thin temper, Saturos placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" He said reasonably. "That's all in the past. We had hoped--" And the condescending glance he sent in Gareth's direction made it clear that he thought his hopes had been misplaced-- "That you might be able to move on, and at least accept that we did the right thing."

"The *right thing*?" Gareth asked incredulously. "You murdered all those people, nearly killed *us*, and you call that the right thing? Are you crazy? Was all that worth Prox?"

"Yes," Came the firm answer, and Saturos's clenched fist gave testament to the fact that his own temper was waning. "Prox would be worth any price."

Gareth opened his mouth to voice a retort, but Piers stepped forward, cutting him off. "That doesn't matter now," He said tiredly, waving a hand as if to dismiss the tension. "What matters now is that Alex needs help. We'll have to accept the fact that Saturos and Menardi did what they thought was right, though that may conflict with what we think is right. If they are willing to compromise and refrain from violence, then we should give them what aid we can."

"I agree," Sheba nodded, a thoughtful frown stretching across her countenance. "Whatever evil they might have done, they need help now. Besides, we're stronger. If they get violent, we can always restrain them."

There was a murmur of assent among the others, including Jenna and a rather reluctant Gareth.

"Yes," said Isaac softly, his eyes never leaving Alex's face. "They need our help, so we should help them. Piers, could you give Mia a hand?"

The Lemurian nodded and knelt next to the aforementioned healer, who was now trying to cast Ply, to no avail. He added his power to hers, and a soft blue glow surrounded the trio, which added an almost unearthly feel to the room, especially considering Alex's wings.

After this had gone on for a while and no results had been reached, Felix turned his attention to the innkeeper. He was still laying in an ungainly position on the floor, though his wife had joined him and he now seemed much calmer. He was obviously afraid, but under the impression that the adepts were in control of the situation.

"It's alright, they mean no harm," Felix assured him softly, helping him up. "We'll take care of it."

The innkeeper gave a wobbly shake of his head and took his wife by the hand. They hurried to the other side of the room, as far away from the small crowd as possible, and watched them through wide eyes.

Felix shook his head and returned to leaning against the wall, unconsciously mirroring Saturos's position as he sunk into thought. Alex had always been distant from everyone, and though he had traveled with Saturos and Menardi for the most part, it had not been uncommon for him to disappear for days at a time on some mysterious business of his own. When asked, he had said that he had simply needed "time away". Maybe he had been a good, honest man at heart. Maybe he hadn't been. It was hard to tell in someone whose motivations had rarely, if ever, been very

clear, and whose true thoughts and beliefs were as shrouded as the sky on a stormy day.

Alex was the kind of person who existed in many forms and many layers to many different people. To Mia, he had been a childhood friend, an apprentice, a healer. To Felix he had been a comrade, a visionary, a warrior. To Saturos and Menardi he had been an ally, even perhaps a tool. To Karst and Agatio he had been a puppeteer, guiding them like a master under the guise of alliance.

To Jenna he had been an annoyance, but also a sympathetic ear, for he had proved himself more than able to listen and give good advice. Against her better judgment, Jenna had often confided in him: her fears, her regrets, her sorrows. One of the things that made Alex so dangerous, Felix thought, was his ability to make people trust him and talk to him. He could get almost anything out of almost anyone if given enough time. But as far as he knew, Jenna's own personal demons had not been used against her, which was almost surprising. If nothing else, Alex was manipulative. That was one of very few traits that Felix could be sure he possessed.

Sometimes he wished he could have known the man better, but then he would come to his senses and recognize that no one could *know* him. Just when one became familiar with one of his many layers, another layer would be exposed, and another, and so on and so forth; different people with different motivations, different personalities and dreams.

Well, perhaps he was giving Alex too much credit. Perhaps he was not many people, but one, and the difference was simply in how he was perceived. Perhaps underneath his masks of deception there was a person, single and whole and human. Surely Alex, despite his faults, was no less

human than the rest of them. Not that he'd ever admit it, of course.

Felix was jarred abruptly from his musings by a shout of surprise and triumph, and several following exclamations. Mia and Piers were backing away from their charge, who was still glowing with a soft psynesetic light, which made him seem less like a human and more like some denizen of the Gods-- an angel, perhaps. At first he was confused as to the source of all the activity, but then he realized that Alex's eyes were open. He was breathing. He was *alive*.

The Mercury adept moved a hand in front of his face, flexed it, and raised his eyebrows slightly at this success. His eyes searched his immediate surroundings, and it seemed to be Mia that he first saw, for he gave a startled sort of sound and scrambled backwards, standing so abruptly that he had to steady himself by grabbing onto the door behind him, breathing heavily. Beads of sweat began to form on his brow, and Felix understood with some bewilderment that he had overexerted himself. This should not have come as a shock, as for all intents and purposes he had been revived from near death, but it was still startling to see Alex-- *Alex* of all people-- struggling for breath.

Alex scanned the room again, his eyes widening as he took in their full group, scrutinizing Saturos and Menardi as if unsure that they were real. "*You*." He managed to speak one word, the sound a curse from his lips. He raised one finger, trembling but sure, and pointed directly at Isaac. "*You!*" He cried, and this time it was not a curse but a promised threat, the word strangled with what could have been rage.

"You... are... You are..."

"I am?" Isaac challenged, and Felix could see that he had tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword.

"You are... You have... You have what I need... What I..."

He was clearly delusional, Felix decided, taking into account his accusatory stare and nonsensical words. Perhaps being dead had done something to his head, for this Alex was nothing like the Alex he had once known. This Alex was angry and afraid, emotions that the real Alex never would have dared show. This Alex was a fake, a replacement, a dead man walking...

Isaac stared hard at the winged man. His hand twitched, but he did not draw his sword, nor did he step forward to start a confrontation. "What do you mean?" He asked coolly, his tone disinterested.

"No... You don't understand... I need... I *need*..." He slumped to the floor once again, apparently exhausted from his effort to stand, though his gaze never wavered from Isaac's face. His countenance was etched deeply and cruelly with an unmistakable hatred. "...Need..."

And then he collapsed again, his expression relaxing into one of impassive innocence. Mia and Piers rushed forward, but it was soon clear that he was only sleeping; exhausted, perhaps, by his revival.

"How did you revive him?" Felix asked at once, kneeling next to the healers and frowning at Alex's crumpled form.

Mia spread her hands, palm-up, and shrugged. "We tried douse. I have no idea why, but we tried everything else... And somehow, I think it worked." She frowned. "I don't see how it's possible for his body to have been preserved, but it

was. I also don't see how it was possible that a simple douse awakened him where nothing else would, but..."

"But relatively impossible things have been happening often, it seems," Piers picked up the conversation after she trailed off, tossing a meaningful glance at Menardi. "Perhaps once Alex is conscious and in his right mind again, he can explain a few things for us."

Privately, Felix had his doubts about that, but he nodded anyway. "I hope so."

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Alex wasn't precisely sure how it had happened, but he knew that the beginnings of his plan were already coming to fruition. He was with Isaac and his motley crew of followers, which was highly convenient. If he could simply stay here with them, thinking of some excuse why he could not go on his own way, then he would have plenty of time to plan further.

His ultimate goal, of course, was to defeat Isaac and regain the rest of the golden sun's power. This couldn't possibly be too difficult; even if Isaac really did hold such massive power, he was relatively untrained. Alex felt sure that he would have no idea how to access his power and use it in the manner he intended. Though the longer he waited, the more time Isaac would have to familiarize himself with his new power, and the more dangerous he would become. It was in Alex's best interest to defeat him as soon as possible.

The only problem was that, much as he hated to admit it, Alex was unfamiliar with the nature of his own power. He had not yet had the opportunity to test it. He could only hope that he would gain that opportunity within the next few days.

It was also a problem, and a rather frustrating one at that, that he was not yet strong enough physically to stay awake for longer than a few hours or cross a room on his own two feet. He supposed that this was to be expected after his traitorous body had mysteriously given out on him. He was glad-- though he would never admit *how* glad-- that Saturos and Menardi had brought him to people capable of helping him. He wasn't entirely sure how Mia had managed to revive him, but he felt an inexplicable certainty that only a Mercury adept could have helped him.

Hopefully he would grow strong enough and confident enough in his own power within the next few days that he would be able to defeat Isaac. That he was surrounded by his friends was of no consequence; his power of persuasion could easily get Isaac on his own. And then... Well, then Weyard would finally see his strength. What he would do with it, he wasn't really sure. There were so many mind-boggling possibilities.

With the aid of the golden sun, he could not only play God, he could *be* God. If there was a God, the full power of the golden sun was such that he could defeat that God and take his place. It was not called *limitless* power for nothing.

If there was indeed a God, Alex felt that abolishing him would be his first course of action. The idea of some omnipresent, all-powerful being had always made him uncomfortable, even as a child. If this God guided the actions of all humans, as the Imilians had taught, then his freedom of choice meant nothing. If some being held Fate in his hands and made every human do as that Fate dictated, then was not all life meaningless? Were not all beings simply pawns to be used and discarded?

If there was a power of Fate or God, then Alex would destroy it. He would let humans find their own way in life, rather than have their actions dictated by some unseeable force. He would become God but disregard that power called Fate. He would free all of humanity from its chains-- and kill that damned "Wise One" while he was at it.

And if the Wise One *was* God? The idea was laughable, but also plausible. Well, if he was, then Alex's course of action was the same. He would find and kill that rock, and strip away his idiotic ideals and plans. He would not be *used*. He refused to be a puppet, especially of this Wise One. He would *not* succumb to him. He, Alex, would be Weyard's only God and ruler.

That he had finally attained his lifelong dream of immortality was most useful. In this way he could keep any new Gods from rising up and harnessing humanity to their will.

And as for Vale... He would see to it that such towns were destroyed and never rebuilt, that such archaic thinking was forever discarded. He toyed with the idea of destroying Imil as well, but eventually dropped it. Even if Imil was permeated by such archaic thoughts, it was his hometown, and something in him twinged at the idea of seeing it demolished. It would stay, much as he hated to admit it.

The future stretched out before him in many intertwining paths, and he believed that all of these paths would lead him to his goals. How could they not? There was no one left to defeat him now, no one left to be his voice of reason, no one left to control him and reign him in. He was free to choose his own path, and eagerly anticipated where it would take him: to places unknown by every other human, to places unexplored and paths untrodden.

Yes. He was the only being for millenia, and perhaps in all of time and eternity, to transcend the boundary that existed between God and man. His dream had been fulfilled... And he was not going to die.

He was *not* going to die. *Ever*.

He'd show them, those doctors, those healers, those fumbling idiots... They'd given him two years to live, maybe less. And now look at him! He was ageless and all-powerful! He would never succumb to such human weaknesses as illness and death. Never *again*.

And he told himself that he was not afraid of death, so it didn't matter anyway, and he was wasting his time thinking about it. He told himself that he was not afraid of what was to come, because now the future could only hold hope.

But deep inside, he also feared that he was wrong, though this was a soft voice that he quickly smothered. There was nothing to be afraid of anymore. Not now, not ever.

He was free.

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A/N: *Gah*. I apologize for that hopelessly long and incoherent block of text. If you are still sitting at your computer reading this, and not huddled on the floor in the fetal position, as I was tempted to do while writing this, then you have my congratulations.